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Nothing ever seems to rouse the population of Mabase, yet everyone is stirring with gossip when the mayor's adulterous affair is publicized. This is especially hard on the mayor's daughter, Ninamori, class president and Naota's friend. The other women in Naota's life aren't helping his stress level either. Haruko is closing in on her interplanetary foes, and Mamimi's downward spiral into madness is only spinning faster...

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Original Concept and Project By
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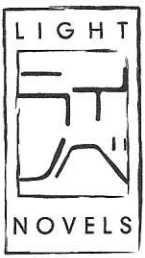


FLCL™ | Story By YOJI ENOKIDO Art By KAZUYA TSURUMAKI 2

Fooly Cooly

Volume 2

Yoji Enokido
GAINAX



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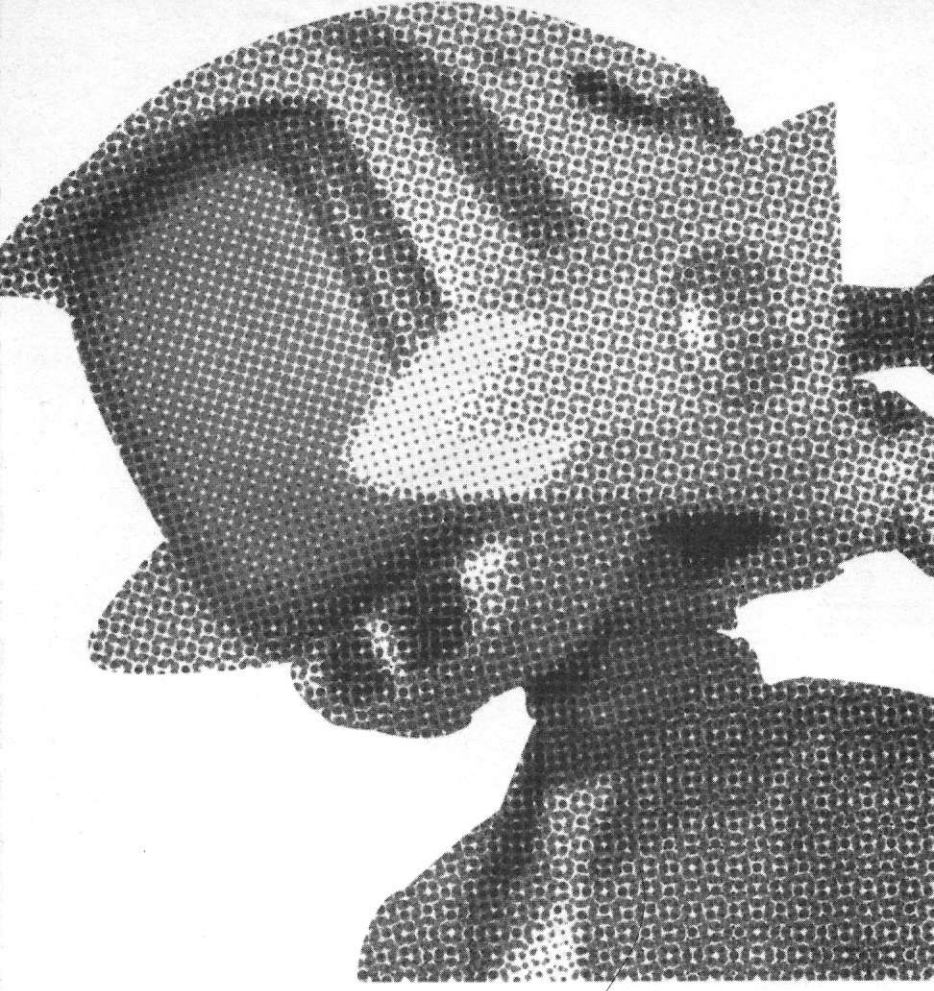
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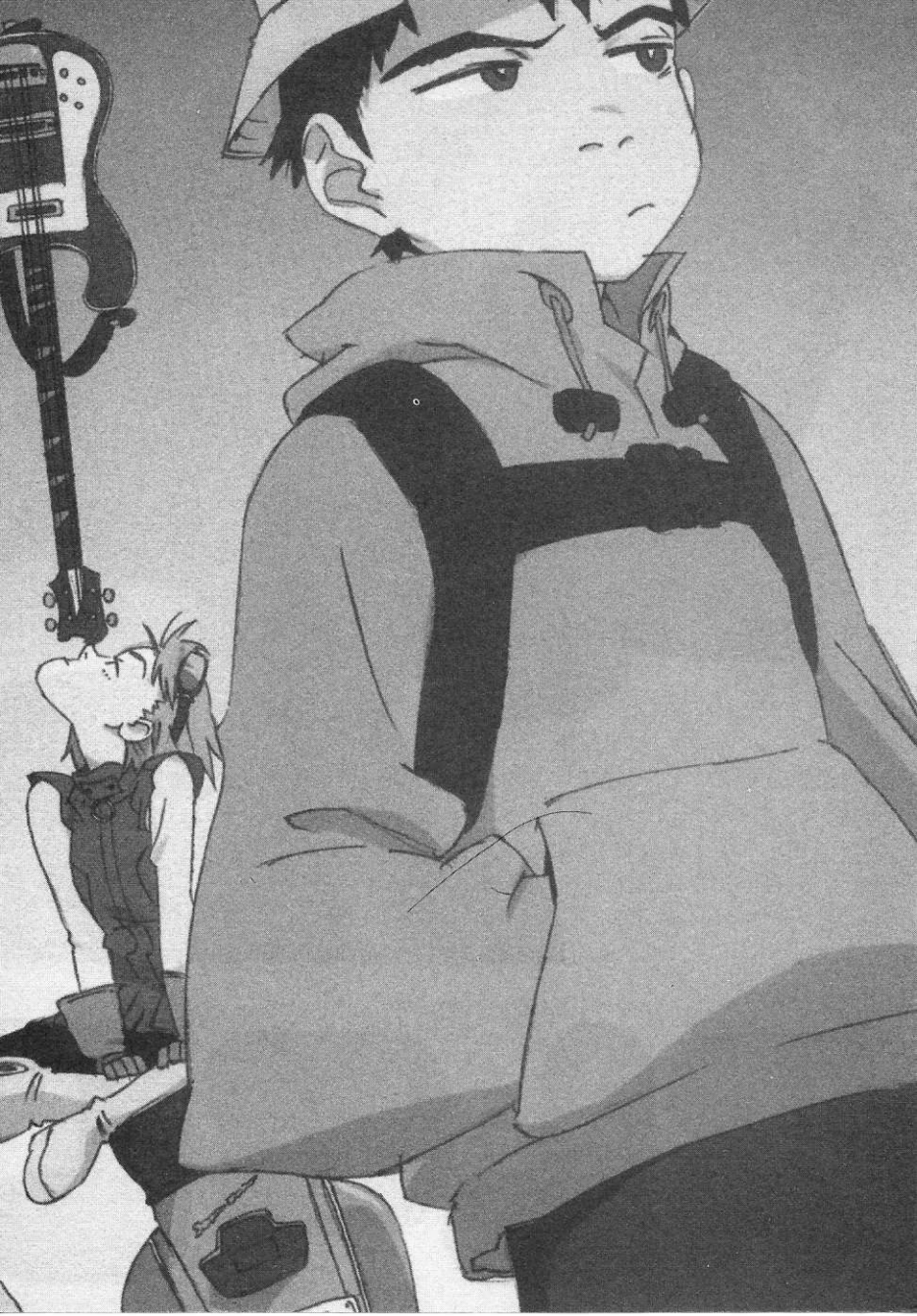
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"The artificial satellite steadily hurdled toward Mabase city. It wasn't a normal man-made satellite, and it didn't descend normally."

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Marquis de Carabas

CHAPTER 1

When had Eri Ninamori noticed she wasn't an ordinary girl?

No, that's not quite the right way to phrase the question. There wasn't a point at which she'd noticed; she'd been special since the moment she was born. Actually, she'd been special even before she was born.

Ninamori was the tallest girl in the sixth grade at Mabase Elementary. That wasn't anything special, though—especially considering there were a few girls in the fifth grade who were taller than she was. There was another reason Ninamori was special: She was the only one out of all the girls in the class who'd caught a snake or a lizard with her hands. Of course, that didn't mean she was special, either, but she thought reptiles were cute. She really couldn't see why they were anything to be afraid of. The reason Ninamori was special had to do with something entirely different.

Four years ago—just as she was beginning her second year of elementary school—Ninamori had modeled for an advertisement for a study desk. All she had to do was open her textbooks on the desk and grin for the cameraman. The ad ended up running in all the education journals across the entire country.

The response from adults to Ninamori's modeling had been very positive, ranging from, "The way she smiles is so professional" and "She could be a top model" to "So pretty!" and "She should go out for some modeling auditions." Although Ninamori had really enjoyed herself, she hadn't done any other modeling work since then. She knew the adults who were lavishly praising her were only seeking her father's favor.

The real reason Ninamori had been chosen for that modeling job was because of her father's position. "We've chosen you to do it" and "please do this for us" were two completely different things. To top it off, the finished photos for the ad weren't that good. The lighting in the shot they used was subpar; and all in all, Ninamori

could've been made to appear much cuter. The girl on the magazine page struck her as an idiot with her wide-open, toothy grin. *Maybe I'm not very special,* she thought. Getting praised by the foolish adults who'd made the photo was meaningless. The reason Ninamori was special lay somewhere else.

Ninamori was aware she was pretty, and she didn't have any of the typical complexes a girl of her towering height usually had. In fact, on days she wasn't at school, she'd wear shoes or sandals with amazingly tall heels to make herself appear taller than she was. At least half the boys in her class had a crush on her. After all, she was the girl who shined the brightest. *Maybe I'm not very special.* Ninamori was pretty, smart, and she was class president. All the counselors and teachers thought she was special. *Maybe I'm not very special.* Above all, her father was the mayor of Mabase. *Maybe I'm not very special. Maybe I'm not very special. Maybe . . .*

SHUT UP!

Occasionally, Ninamori would hear that annoying voice. Every once in a while, there were annoying things in the world—annoying actions, annoying people.

That morning, Ninamori was on her way to school in the car. Going to and from school in a car was forbidden by the school unless you were sick or had broken something—but if you went to a side street where no one could see you getting out, there wasn't a problem. Of course, Ninamori took care that no one saw her.

The traffic light turned red, and the woman who was driving put her foot on the brake. A second later, the woman pulled out her compact, slapped on some makeup, and quickly sprayed herself with perfume. Ninamori, who was sitting in the back, assumed an expression of disgust as she opened the window.

Every once in a while, there were annoying things in the world—annoying actions, annoying people.

The woman who was driving Ninamori was Ninamori's father's secretary. For the past two years, her father's secretary had always been by his side. She was a woman with gaudy makeup—a woman who put on too much perfume and who clearly had a bad sense of smell.

"I'm impressed." The annoying woman had an equally annoying voice. "You listened calmly. The mayor had been worried."

The previous night, Ninamori had heard from her father that he might be leaving her mother.

"Daddy still loves Mommy, but they don't go so well together anymore," Ninamori's father had explained. "Because Daddy's the mayor now, he can't publicly divorce her—it'd cause too much of a fuss. So, for now, they're going to live separately—in different houses. It's an adult thing. You understand, don't you, sweetie?" Ninamori's father had tried to put on an apologetic face, but he still seemed happy.

The thing Ninamori hated most was that when her father had told her about him and her mother, that secretary woman had been right by his side, as she always was.

"It's between my father and mother," Ninamori muttered disinterestedly.

"You're so clever, aren't you?" the secretary replied. "When I was Miss Eri's age, I was so much more childish."

"Well, if they want to split up, there isn't anything I can do about it."

The light turned green and the woman put the car into gear, speeding forward. Watching the woman's hand operate the gear stick made Ninamori feel like throwing up. The truth was that Ninamori hadn't wanted to ride in the car with this woman, but when Ninamori opened her front door, the woman had been waiting there with a cheerful smile on her face.

"I'll drive you to school," the woman offered. It seemed as though she was pleased by the fact Ninamori hadn't raised any objections to her parents' separation.

Why do you have to be the one driving me? Gross! Ninamori thought to herself, although she really wanted to scream it at the top of her lungs. She grew more annoyed when she observed the woman driving with a self-satisfied look.

Ninamori's father had bought the car a month before, intending it to be the family car. However, the woman had started driving it around as if it were her own. She'd put her own CDs in it, decorated it with ugly toys, and marked it with her perfume.

Take me to school? You must be kidding! You're my hired driver—nothing more than an employee. You still have to do what I say. With that in mind, Ninamori got into the backseat instead of the passenger seat. Of course, the idiotic woman hadn't taken Ninamori's hint at all. She really believed Ninamori had no idea that she'd been a part of Ninamori's parents' separation.

"You're holding up so well," praised the secretary. "Don't worry, I won't do anything to damage your father's image."

"That's a relief, secretary. I have faith in your abilities," Ninamori replied with blatant sarcasm.

"You stayed over last night, but you're wearing a different suit than you were yesterday."

"Oh, you're very observant."

Once again, the secretary had failed to recognize Ninamori's sarcasm and instead gave her a broad smile.

Ninamori knew her father's secretary had been in his room all night. The reason for her parents' separation was, without a doubt, all because of this woman.

Remembering the sight of her father holding her mother's hand when he'd first been elected mayor, Ninamori could hear him thank

her mother all over again. Ninamori's parents had been very close. Any small thing could bring them closer together. If her parents could only enjoy something together again, they'd definitely go back to being a family like they had been before. If this woman weren't in the way, that is.

"You have a change of clothes, too? Why's that?" the woman asked after noticing the paper bag filled with clothes near Ninamori's feet.

It was Ninamori's costume for the Marquis de Carabas. "I'm doing a play for the school fair. I'm the lead role," she explained.

It's at the most painful times that people grow up. The most painful few days of Ninamori's life were about to begin.

This is the story of the girl who pretended to be the Marquis de Carabas.

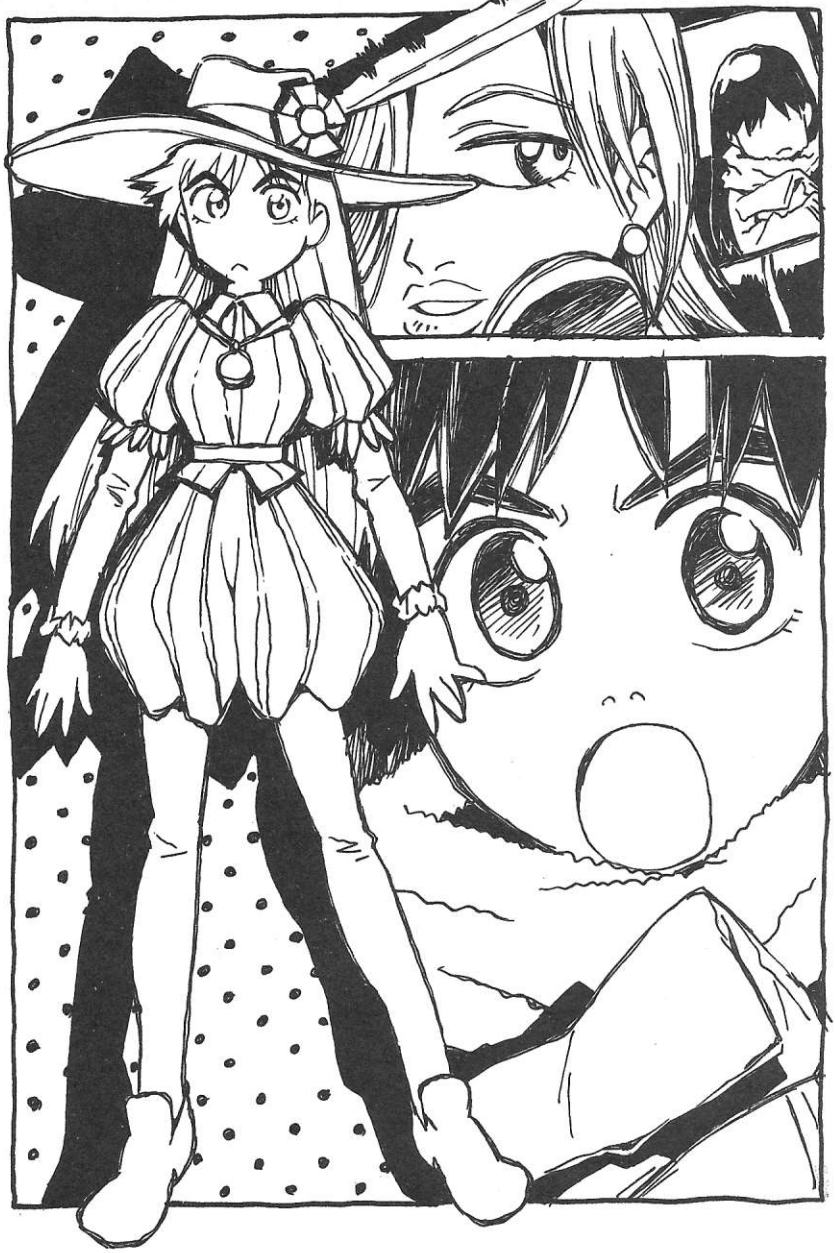
The thing is . . . although the types of happiness one can experience are limited, there are unlimited variations of misfortune. One of Ninamori's classmates understood this better than she did. In fact, he'd considered himself the most unfortunate person in the world for the past month.

The boy was none other than Naota Nandaba.

Naota left the house to go to school with a backpack slung over his back and a baseball cap on his head. Naota had become better acquainted with misfortune because of what was under that baseball cap.

Naota's house was a bakery, but in the mornings when there should've been customers, there wasn't a single person to be seen. Shigekuni Bakery wasn't particularly popular.

In the shop's small parking lot, there was a Vespa and a girl crouched next to it, whistling happily. She was examining her beloved scooter carefully for any problems.



It was Haruko Haruhara. The other day, she'd moved into the Nandaba house as a hired housekeeper.

"Hey, wannabe housekeeper," Naota called out to Haruko.

Although she must've heard, Haruko acted as if she hadn't, turning on the Vespa's motor. Engaging in an over-the-top display of revving her engine and turning her ear to the engine noise, Haruko seemed to be teasing Naota. Her actions clearly indicated that she wasn't going to acknowledge his presence at all.

"Cleaning lady!" Naota yelled out, enraged by the fact that he was being ignored. In class, Naota played it cool, but when it came to Haruko, he became angry very quickly. "Maid!" he continued mockingly.

Haruko revved the engine again as though she still hadn't noticed Naota was there.

"Alien!" Naota shouted, half ready to give up.

Finally, Haruko turned around. When Naota shouted, "Alien!" he'd actually meant, "weird girl who might as well be an alien"; but Haruko, who tended to have a horribly stubborn attitude, reacted in a rather peculiar way. "Yes?" she asked.

"Clean up my room, will you?"

Since Haruko had come to board at the Nandaba house, she'd been staying in Naota's room, taking the top bunk of the bed. Now, the room was scattered with all the bike parts that Haruko had brought with her. There literally wasn't space left to walk.

"What's the big problem?" Haruko asked. "The room matches the store in that way."

When Naota scanned the area, he saw that the empty bakery was, indeed, piled high with cardboard boxes. Every box bore the mark of a printing house.

Naota stared at the boxes, letting out an extended sigh. *More fanzines that didn't sell?*

"Mon-chan said he's a journalist," Haruko said.

"Mon-chan?" Naota replied.

It sounded as if Haruko were referring to Naota's father, Kamon. Before he'd come to the suburbs of Mabase, Naota's father had worked as an editor at a publishing house in Central. Although Kamon was now working in the bakery, it seemed as though he hadn't completely given up his former career and was publishing things himself. Naota thought it was a complete waste of money and effort.

Employing Haruko was a prime example of wasting money.

Whatever you do, please stop with the "Mon-chan," thought Naota.

The idling Vespa engine emitted a small explosion, spewed out black smoke, and stopped. Haruko crouched over her scooter once again and started fiddling with engine parts. "I don't understand why such quality parts are malfunctioning. . . ."

"Junk heap," Naota spat out as a parting shot before heading toward school.

Haruko's greasy arms suddenly reached out from behind, grabbing Naota by the collar.

"That hurts!" Naota yelped.

"You're going to school in that really ugly hat again?" Haruko asked, pulling the hat off Naota's head.

A new horn—a double one, no less—had been growing under Naota's hat. The pair of horns resembled cat ears and were most unusual appendages, which made Naota the most unfortunate person in the world.

It'd happened a couple nights before; the horns had started growing out of nowhere. To hide them, Naota had worn a hat for the entirety of the previous day. He'd even slept with it on. It was annoying, but if he didn't keep the horns pressed down, they'd grow even more.

This was actually the third time this had happened to Naota. No matter how much one traveled the world, one wouldn't find another boy with cat ears growing out of his head.

"I can't get enough of them. They're so soft and cute—and so therapeutic to stroke!" Haruko squealed.

"D-don't touch them!" Naota pleaded.

As Haruko continued to admiringly stroke the cat ears, Naota sank down on the ground. It seemed that whenever his newly acquired ears were touched, he lost control over his body—but in a feel-good kind of way.

"See you tonight," Haruko waved, returning the hat to Naota's head.

"Tonight?"

"You're coming shopping with me, right?"

"Shopping?"

What is she talking about? Naota wondered.

"You want your normal curry, don't you?"

Naota suddenly realized what Haruko was talking about. The night before, they'd eaten curry for dinner, but at Haruko's request, the curry roux used hadn't been their normal one. It was super spicy, making it troublesome for Naota to eat. Actually, it was so spicy that he couldn't even manage a mouthful. The only curry Naota could digest was the least spicy curry roux sold, Star Prince Curry, which could only be purchased at a small supermarket outside of town.

"Fine, show me where the supermarket is," Naota recalled Haruko telling him. He was surprised that Haruko really wanted to go shopping with him. He hadn't actually seen her do any housework—not even once. The previous night's curry had been made by the robot, Canti, according to Haruko's orders.

Surprisingly, the Nandaba household had a robot in it, too—a humanoid robot with a TV set for a head. The robot had emerged from the first horn that had come out of Naota's head.

A few days earlier, a horn that had grown out of Naota's head had turned out to be a section of a robot that proceeded to separate itself from Naota. Indeed, the kinds of happiness are limited, but the variations of misfortune are limitless.

The absurd robot, named Canti, did more housework than Haruko. Even now, it was standing on the balcony airing the bed sheets while staring down at Haruko and Naota.

"You're late!"

According to the clock on the classroom wall, Naota was only a little late; but the moment he put his bag down on the desk, Ninamori scolded him. She seemed genuinely annoyed.

"You seem to be in a bad mood this morning, Class President," Naota observed.

"I told you yesterday, turn up to morning practice on time," Ninamori replied scathingly.

"Oh . . ."

Naota's class had decided on a play for the forthcoming school fair, which was three days away. However, Naota, who'd intended to skip practices and push the responsibility onto someone else, had only been half listening. He thought that because only about ten people would actually perform, there wasn't any real reason he should participate. Naota had important business after class, anyway.

"Don't you get it? You're the main part," Ninamori informed Naota.

"*You're* the main part. Anyone can do my bit. I don't want to."

"We voted on it. You're the cat, Naota."

Suddenly reminded of his cat ears, Naota touched his cap with his hand. He didn't intend to remove his hat in class at any

point during the day because it was his "horn hider." He'd told his homeroom teacher that he'd injured his head.

Cat . . . Naota grumbled.

Ninamori was right: The class had decided by a vote that Naota would play the cat.

Was it because I have to be the cat that these horns started growing? Naota asked himself.

"You'd better not skip the after-school practices," Ninamori warned.

Class plays are so stupid! Why would she get so worked up about them? Naota wondered. *Is it because she feels responsible as class president?*

The first class of the day was Japanese, the boring, sleep-inducing subject during which one's energy was spent on deciding the direction and quality of little cartoons drawn in the corners of the textbook. If a student became too focused on his craft, he'd end up working at Gainax or Production I.G. (Taking it too far? Okay, okay . . .)

From a seat in front of the classroom, Masashi passed Naota a small booklet when the teacher wasn't looking. It was a small, cheap-looking mini-comic with "Come on Mabase" printed on the front.

"Third page," Masashi whispered.

Gaku, who was sitting diagonally opposite, flashed Naota an expression that said, "Take a peek and you'll be surprised." Gaku was probably the person who'd found the mini-comic and brought it to school in the first place. He was always bringing stupid things onto campus; no doubt, this comic was the same as the rest.

Upon opening the comic to the recommended page, Naota frowned. "This . . ."

The contents of what was printed were far more dangerous than Naota had expected, and they certainly weren't anything that should've been passed around that particular class. It was an article exposing the corruption and personal scandal of Mabase's current mayor—Ninamori's father.

Without thinking, Naota glanced over at the class president, who was seated a short distance from him.

"Amazing, huh?" Masashi exclaimed. "I found it at that Moniwa shop."

"Moniwa?"

"You know, that shop run by the old lady who always appears as if she's sleeping and is packed with Crystal Pepsi."

"Crystal Pepsi?"

"What are you doing over there?" When Naota's homeroom teacher Miyaji saw him and Masashi talking, Naota thought they were in for it. It wasn't that Naota was worried about being scolded for passing stuff in class—he was worried about having to hand over the comic to Miyaji.

Miyaji, who was in charge of Naota's class, was still a novice teacher. Her constant enthusiasm was good, but her inflexibility and denseness were not. In some ways, she was very much like a child.

"What's this?" After Miyaji flipped through the booklet she'd taken from Naota's hand, her face went red. "Oh, this is awful. All the students who read this, stand up!"

Gaku, Masashi, and Naota stood up.

There were more students who must've seen it, but it was a rule that in situations like these, only those who'd been caught had to answer to the crime. There was no way any of them would mention anyone else's name.

Staring at the three pitiful students standing up, other students who hadn't been involved giggled.

After scanning the comic, Miyaji was at a loss for words. As expected, it was too intense for such a princess teacher. "This is not allowed! No, no! From today, class one of the sixth grade is prohibited from bringing in vulgar material!"

The girls in the class tittered, thinking the suspects had been caught with a pervy comic. Ninamori smiled, too.

Please . . . is all Naota felt in his heart. *Please lock that magazine up somewhere. We look foolish standing up here as it is. Just don't let Ninamori see that magazine.*

Naota didn't normally care so much for Ninamori, but he didn't want her to be hurt by all her classmates should they find out what was inside the comic. Suddenly overcome with anger, he wondered what kind of senseless idiot would make such a horrid magazine.

"Reading crude material like this is an insult to Ninamori!" Miyaji blurted out, just as Naota had dreaded. His teacher was merely a child, after all. She was the type who'd talk in a loud voice on a battlefield and give away her position to the enemy.

Not surprisingly, Ninamori immediately realized that she—or rather, her father—was the topic of the magazine. She was a clever girl.

"Anything of value was taken by your brother, and all that was left was the cat. Now, you're thinking, 'What am I going to do with a cat?' Don't be so stressed. Calm down and take a good look around. You're bound to find something good. Meow."

Marquis de Carabas

CHAPTER 2

What transpired after school was just as interesting.

In the end, Miyaji didn't show the confiscated magazine to anyone. Ninamori still felt as though she had to see it, however; so after practicing for the play, she headed toward the area where Moniwa was located. Gaku and Masashi had become tongue-tied, but Ninamori had gotten the other boys in the class to tell her where to find the mini-comic. It was right where she'd been told it would be, too—in a small shop that appeared as if it would collapse at any moment, with an old sign that read, "Moniwa Confectioners."

There was a car stopped in front of the shop, and it appeared as though the man driving was discussing something with the shop lady. Actually, it seemed as if the man were ranting at her more than he was talking to her. He was a suspicious-looking middle-aged guy who had a vicious glint in his eyes.

"Great response, right? I predicted that, didn't I? Investigative journalism is needed. Demand for my mini-comic of justice, *Come on Mabase,* is going to be so great tomorrow you'll probably have enough customers to sell all your out-of-date Crystal Pepsi."

"We don't stock any out-of-date items here."

"How about it? Won't you take a few more? A hundred? Eighty?"

That man had to be the creator of the mini-comic.

Noticing Ninamori shooting him a dirty look, the man said, "Ah, princess, I bet this is what you're after," handing her one of the magazines with a smug smile.

"Takkun ditched school, too, meow! You're becoming a bad kid, too, meow! Yum," Mamimi purred, nibbling the nape of Naota's neck.

They were at a levee near Mabase Bridge. For some reason, Naota and Mamimi had started to meet at the bridge after school the night following the fire. Once again, their peculiar relationship had been reinstated. This was the "important appointment" for which Naota had skipped play rehearsal. Almost every day, Mamimi kissed Naota's cheek, licked and nibbled his neck, and left love bites on him.

"I didn't ditch school. That rehearsal doesn't have anything to do with my grades," Naota insisted.

"I was in a school play once. It was so embarrassing, but it made me happy, too."

"Why did it make you happy?"

"Dad and Mom came to see me together, so I remember it very well."

"What did you play?"

"When I was in kindergarten, Sailor Mars; in elementary school, the Little Match Girl; and in middle school, Carrie."

"Why are they all about burning things?"

A vision of the fire remained in the back of Naota's mind. Naturally, he recalled what had happened to the two of them that night. In the end, the police never caught Mamimi for starting the fire. They were still looking for the culprit, but there hadn't been any fires since, so it seemed as though the case would never be solved.

No, it can't happen. They mustn't catch the criminal! Naota thought to himself.

"Takkun, you saved me, didn't you?" Mamimi muttered in a serious tone.

"What?"

"That night. You drove Lord Canti. It was so cool."

"Yeah . . ." Naota replied, attempting to duck the issue.

Although Naota had thought he and Mamimi should talk about it, the fact was that neither of them had bothered to mention what

had happened that night until now. A robot coming out of Naota's head, Mamimi starting the fires—they hadn't spoken about any of it, in favor of "playing around." However, this was to be expected. The pair were too used to enjoying their days without speaking about important things. That was precisely why they'd started this "play"—to escape the important things on their minds. Of course, anything having to do with Tasuku had been put on hold ever since.

Mamimi must know by now that my brother has a girlfriend in America. Naota didn't have the courage to find out for sure today, but it was quite possible that Mamimi knew and was bluffing that she didn't. *Mamimi might even know everything.*

The only thing was that Mamimi had a gross misunderstanding about what had happened that night. Or perhaps it wasn't a misunderstanding as such. To be fair, Naota didn't really understand what had happened either

Mamimi thought Naota had been operating Canti that night, and it seemed as though she thought he'd done so to save her.

Mamimi's words—"*You drove Lord Canti. It was so cool*"—rang in Naota's ears. However, in reality, Naota didn't even remember that night clearly. From the moment he'd been sucked into Canti, Naota had wanted to protect Mamimi from the one-armed robot. He'd panicked because of his desire to protect her.

Naota wanted to believe his thoughts were heard by God (or something like God) and that the deity would become one with him to defeat the violent robot. He wanted to believe that he'd fought for Mamimi's safety. Unfortunately, after Naota had been sucked into Canti, Naota didn't have many solid memories. He'd felt his body stiffen bit by bit in the blackness. Everything about the experience was vague.

"Thank you," Mamimi said, under the impression that Naota had done something heroic.

Naota, who didn't feel bad about being thanked, started to think that because his memory was vague, perhaps he really had controlled Canti and saved Mamimi. At least he'd wanted to save Mamimi in his heart.

After that night, Mamimi had stopped following Canti around as much as she had previously. It seemed as though she still considered Canti an important friend, but the thrill had finally worn off, and most of her interest was back with Naota. The result was that the love bites on Naota's neck were increasing in number. In all honesty, though, Naota was quite fond of the whole situation.

Mamimi yanked off Naota's hat.

Naota panicked, trying to cover his cat ears, but it was too late, as Mamimi's eyes had already spotted them.

Damn! Naota thought to himself.

Within a second, Mamimi's expression had turned to one of fascination, and she started to say things like, "What are those?" and "They're so cute," as well as "So adorable!" as she smothered Naota's cat ears with love. "They're so soft . . . so much fun!"

Naota felt that the world had lost all common sense when people didn't bother to question the presence of cat ears on his head.

Ninamori's footsteps were heavy as she walked home with a copy of *Come on Mabase* in her hands.

That shady-looking man had no way of knowing Ninamori was the daughter of the mayor of Mabase. Regardless, to give a girl carrying a schoolbag on her back that kind of tasteless comic meant something must've been wrong with the man either way.

The magazine had even worse things than she'd imagined in it. It was almost as if the writer hated her father or wanted revenge, because it



delved into scandals in both his private and business life. The first topic covered was the work scandal. It was reported that Ninamori's father had cooperated with a property company to lure the MM Factory to Mabase, and that he'd also received illegal income. At that time, the current Mabase mayor had merely been an upstart in an unknown city, who'd earned his money buying and selling land illegally. He'd ultimately used that dirty money to buy his way into the mayorship of Mabase.

As for Ninamori's father's personal life, the comic featured an exposé on the affair he was having with his secretary, accusing the mayor of being unscrupulous, using pictures of the two of them leaving his house as evidence.

Ninamori felt sicker with every word of the article she read, but she assumed that pretty much all the things it asserted were true. It was a melancholy feeling. The magazine had been passed around the classroom and everyone in the class was now aware of her father's ugly scandal. Naota had seen it, too. *Naota had seen it, too!* It was unbearable.

At the very least, the situation had made Ninamori want to chase that horrid woman out of her home. Ninamori remembered that very morning the woman had said she was a skilled secretary and wouldn't ruin Ninamori's father's image. But all it required was one look at the comic to see how badly the woman had messed up. Ninamori was going to chase her out today, and she was going to get revenge. She almost wanted to thank the horrible man who'd written the magazine.

After having nearly reached her house, Ninamori glanced up, stopping in her tracks. "What?"

There was a large crowd of people gathered in front of her front door—dozens of them—and they all appeared to be reporters. There were several cameramen, too. Like lunatics, the horde swarmed around Ninamori's front door.

As Ninamori stood frozen with astonishment, a girl strolled along the road, quickly heading toward her. It was the secretary, wearing sunglasses as if to disguise herself. The woman's unforgettably revolting perfume hung in the air.

The secretary came to a stop after noticing Ninamori standing there. "Oh, this is ridiculous. I can't even use the back door anymore."

Ninamori peered intently at the woman.

"It's dangerous for you to stay here, too," the secretary added.

"I see you're very skilled at running away," Ninamori observed bitterly.

"Of course. I'm a grown-up," the secretary answered before she fled.

Ninamori watched her leave with hatred in her heart. *Grown-up? What does being a grown-up mean? A stupid adult who's all talk? Perfumed hag.*

The woman Ninamori had wanted to kick out had beaten her to it by running away. Ninamori had felt the woman was no good from the moment she'd met her, and that first impression really cut to the core of what the woman truly was. Speaking of true colors, when the woman had been caught for breaking the speed limit the month before, she'd ranted on and on about how it was her first demerit. As Ninamori's dad comforted her, the woman had kept repeating how she'd never caused an accident or committed a crime, sulking like a child. Despite the fact that the secretary was so weak that being scolded by the police for her misdemeanor shocked her, Ninamori's father had happily entered into a relationship with her.

Ninamori understood the woman's attitude to an extent. Perhaps that was the biggest reason Ninamori disliked her. The secretary unabashedly believed that she alone was more special than everyone else.

When Ninamori scanned the photos in the magazine, staring at the face of the woman who was linking arms with her father and laughing with her mouth open wide; it reminded her of the study desk ad she'd been in. The woman wore the same idiotic smile.

Maybe I'm not very special, Ninamori thought.

Ninamori had nowhere to escape, but she wisely left that place before being spotted by the paparazzi.

The sun slowly sank behind the MM factory, which had apparently been built under the guidance of Ninamori's father.

Ninamori predicted that when night fell, the journalists would also disperse—or that her father would do something to make them leave.

In an effort to avoid her house, and with nothing else to do but waste time, Ninamori had been loitering around town. Feeling just miserable enough to think calmly about everything, she almost started to cry. She was dejected and angry, wondering whether her father would regret anything if she were to die that night. When Ninamori imagined her father bawling and repenting, she felt a little better—but then she reconsidered. *No, if that happened, it would make the crazed journalists even happier.*

Reports of Ninamori's father's scandal were probably already on the evening news. As she walked amid the pedestrians at dusk, Ninamori suspected that all the people she passed were staring at her. She felt an unbearable weight, as if she were a fugitive.

Ninamori decided that she needed to be where no one else was present until it got dark. The riverbank would be perfect, considering it was deserted and quiet, as well. On the way to the river, she bought a curry roll and a Crystal Pepsi. Her father had always told her, "Junk food is bad; good girls don't eat that," but today was the right day for a minor rebellion.

As Ninamori had predicted, the riverbank was devoid of people at dusk. Sitting down on the concrete bank, she put down her school bag. "I don't have a home to go to anymore. All I have left is this useless cat. . . ."

Suddenly, words Ninamori had memorized for the play came spilling from her mouth. She recalled the tragic hero, lost, with no place to go. She felt as though the protagonist's circumstances somewhat matched her situation now, and that made her even sadder. Far more tragic than the play was the reality that Ninamori had no one on her side. She didn't even have a cat.

I can't lose, Ninamori thought. *I'm special. I'm a special girl. A scandal like this only makes me more special.*

Holding back the tears that threatened to trickle down her face, Ninamori took a huge bite out of her curry bread. She resolved that there was no way she was going to cry today. *Hmm, this is pretty cool. I'm much cooler right now than that mouthy secretary who ran away.*

"The class president shouldn't be eating junk food," proclaimed a familiar voice coming from behind Ninamori.

When Ninamori turned around, Naota was standing right behind her. She was utterly confused as to why Naota was there, but the sight of a familiar classmate made her feel better. Naota's unexpected appearance must've been the work of God.

Keeping her thoughts to herself, Ninamori addressed Naota in the tone she always used as class president. "You skipped rehearsal. What were you doing?"

Naota pointed to the curry bread in Ninamori's hand. "Junk food! I'm going to tell Miyaji."

"Naota, sometimes I think you're a delinquent."

"Well," Naota replied with satisfaction.

"That hat looks awful on you," Ninamori blurted out, although she thought Naota was quite cute when he pouted his lips.

"Perhaps," Naota started, sitting next to Ninamori, "something's happened at home?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with you," Ninamori asserted.

With Naota sitting next to her, Ninamori really did feel stronger. Despite the fact that she'd been trapped in an unpleasant flow, like an escalator descending slowly toward sorrow, she now felt as though things were returning to normal little by little.

BE HERE. SIT HERE. STAY WITH ME FOREVER! Ninamori shouted in her head.

"Don't worry about that gossipy article," Naota urged.

"All of it was pretty much true," Ninamori replied.

It's all right, though, she thought. I'm not going to lose. And Naota, you're with me now, too.

Of course, Ninamori wasn't aware of the kind of play Naota and Mamimi had recently engaged in.

A bus passed the two of them, stopping at the nearby bus stop. It was already getting dark, and the bus lights seemed to create a small opening into another world.

Where do I want to go? Ninamori pondered. She didn't want to be where she was any longer. She wanted to go somewhere else, together with Naota, as she was at that moment.

"I have a lot of money. I'm the mayor's daughter," Ninamori declared. Her next words flowed from her mouth so naturally: "Hey, do you want to go somewhere?"

"Now?" Naota asked, a little annoyed. "Where?"

Ninamori immediately regretted her spur-of-the-moment words. *C'mon, what was I thinking?*

"Naota, you're Puss in Boots, right?" Ninamori inquired to cover up her embarrassment. "Therefore, you have to listen to what your master says."

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh, who?"

"Our housekeeper," Naota replied.

It was true. Naota was meeting Haruko to show her the way to the supermarket where she could buy Star Prince Curry.

That means you'll go away? Ninamori wondered in horror.

As Ninamori fell silent, overcome by the sadness of being left on her own again, she and Naota heard the sound of a motorbike.

"She's here," Naota said, standing up.

Glancing in the direction of the sound, Ninamori saw a Vespa speeding down the small path cut into the bank, and she assumed that the girl riding it must've been Naota's housekeeper.

The approaching scooter was traveling at an amazing speed, and Naota couldn't help but remember the scene of Haruko fixing her bike this morning. "This isn't good. . . ."

It wasn't by design that Haruko was whizzing toward the duo at breakneck speed. It was because the brakes on her Vespa didn't work.

Sensing the obvious danger, Ninamori stood up. The approaching headlamps illuminated her and Naota's figures right before the quiet riverside became the scene of a riotous accident.

"Get out the way!" Haruko's penetrating yell overlapped with the sound of the explosion that echoed throughout the area.

As Naota had expected, the Vespa's brakes were stuck, and it was barreling directly toward him and Ninamori.

How many times has this happened? Naota asked himself as he soared through the air. *Humans sure can get used anything!*

Naota and Ninamori simultaneously rolled onto the bank. Due to the force of the explosion and the rough landing, Naota's hat blew off, revealing his cat ears underneath. As he bumped heads with Ninamori, there was a momentary flash of light. The Vespa had chaotically tumbled away after launching the pair to their new location.

Grumbling, the girl got up. "Ugh! I should've died."

"Ouch!" Ninamori winced as she touched her hand to her head in the spot it'd been hit. There was a large bump. She really did feel as though this day was the worst day of her entire life.

Gazing in front of her, Ninamori saw that Naota was still spread out on the ground and hadn't come around.

Could it be . . . ? she wondered.

"Naota!" Clinging to Naota's body, the first thing Ninamori noticed—even before checking if he was okay or not—were the cat ears on his head. "What are these?"

"Don't touch them!" the Vespa girl ordered.

"Eh?"

"An underage girl mustn't touch such things!"

Unfortunately, Ninamori was already firmly gripping the fluffy things protruding from Naota's head. She was the only girl in her class who would hold a snake or a lizard, so something like a pair of cat ears felt completely harmless to her.

Cat ears aside, who is this tall girl? Ninamori asked herself. *Naota's housekeeper? Did she just run over Naota and me with her bike?*

Haruko didn't seem the least bit flustered about knocking over Ninamori and Naota as she picked up Ninamori's curry bread and started biting into it happily. "Hey, this is yummy!"

She's weird, Ninamori thought. *I don't know who she is, but this girl is weird. She may be really, really dangerous. She doesn't act like an ordinary person at all.*

"When are you going to let go of those?" Haruko asked.

Ninamori still had Naota's cat ears in her hands. They had a strange feel to them, but upon closer inspection, they were indeed growing straight out of Naota's head. *Cat ears are growing out of Naota's head?*

"What are these?" Ninamori inquired.

"Well, you've given me no choice now that you've seen them," the tall girl said coldly, taking another bite.

Marquis de Carabas

CHAPTER 3

Three people riding a single Vespa headed through the darkness toward the Nandaba residence. Ninamori was on the rear of the motorbike, but not on the Vespa's seat, so she was forced to cling to Haruko, who was driving. They were traveling at an extremely fast speed, and to make matters worse, neither Ninamori nor Naota was wearing a helmet.

"If someone sees us, you're going to get written up," Ninamori informed the driver.

"It'll be fine," Haruko replied. "I don't have a license."

"Well, you've given me no choice now that you've seen them." After Haruko Haruhara uttered that grim line, Ninamori had thought she was going to be eliminated for the sake of preserving Naota's secret. She'd pegged the Vespa girl for that kind of dangerous adversary.

Seizing the unconscious Naota by the collar, Haruko had made him stand up. After putting his fallen hat back on his head, she then proceeded to slap him violently a couple of times, out of the blue. It seemed as though this type of violence was typical for Haruko. When Naota finally had come to, she'd studied his neck closely and then laughed, saying that he'd been doing naughty stuff again.

"Shut up already," Naota had muttered to the girl.

Such argumentative attitudes seemed to be standard between the two of them.

"Are you okay?" Ninamori had asked.

Naota had panicked and felt his head, worried that Ninamori had seen his cat ears. Not realizing his hat had come off earlier, he found that his hat was on his head and then, with an expression of fake concern, had asked if Ninamori was okay.

"Well, we ran her over, and it's not as if we can leave her. How about taking her in for a while?" Haruko suggested.

"Where are we going?" Ninamori asked.

"Takkun's house." Haruko called Naota "Takkun," as did the high school girl who'd been waiting for Naota outside school the other day.

Takkun, Ninamori had whispered to herself.

Haruko had picked up the fallen Vespa. "Get on."

"Three people on the bike again?" Naota had complained. "I thought your brakes were broken."

"It isn't a problem. I'll make it listen to me this time. Hey, girlie, you too."

"I . . ." Ninamori uttered.

"You're coming, aren't you? It's a shoddy bakery, but it's Takkun's home."

It almost felt as if Haruko had decided for Ninamori after she'd read Ninamori's true feelings.

Long story short, Ninamori had ended up carrying three people on her scooter, heading for the Nandaba home. Ninamori hadn't been forced to go, though.

Well, I guess if I don't have anywhere else to go, I may as well go to Naota's, Ninamori had said to herself.

"I'll go," she'd declared aloud.

"You're coming, too?" Naota had whined.

Somehow, Ninamori found Naota's peevish attitude cute. She already knew that his house was a bakery, as she'd been around Shigekuni Bread before. At the time, there hadn't seemed to be anyone around, and she hadn't ascertained whether it was still open for business; however, her purpose for being there hadn't been to buy bread, anyway.

When did I start noticing Naota? Ninamori tried to recall.

It wasn't as though Ninamori liked Naota—he was merely a boy she was interested in. He was sweet, cocky, and above all else, clever. She thought he was a special boy and deemed him a suitable friend for a special girl like herself.

Ninamori had become increasingly curious about Naota. He was different than the other boys and was rather mysterious. There were so many unsolved questions about him, though: the high school girl who'd waited for him at the school gate; his violent maid; and, if there was no mistaking what Ninamori had just seen, Naota had cat ears growing out of his head. Naota Nandaba had cat ears!

What was that? What happened? Ninamori wondered, hoping she could get to the bottom of it if she went to Naota's home.

All these questions whizzed through Ninamori's mind as she held onto Haruko, driving the scooter. Once Ninamori realized she'd completely forgotten all her own problems for a short while, she smirked.

When the trio reached the front of the Shigekuni bakery, Haruko screamed, "Stop!" as she kicked the side of the Vespa with the heel of her boot. As if surprised, the Vespa stood up on its back tire, doing a wheelie of sorts, before it suddenly came to a halt. It almost seemed as if the Vespa had listened to Haruko.

Naota and Ninamori thought Haruko's driving was haphazard at best, and although her method of stopping the bike seemed abnormal, it didn't occur to them that it completely ignored the laws of physics in the third dimension.

Breathing in the strong smell of curry permeating the shop, Naota complained that he didn't want to eat the previous day's leftovers.

"You'll eat." Without waiting for an answer, Haruko pushed Ninamori into the living room.

Ninamori, who had nowhere to go for a while, was grateful for the offer.

Gathered around the table were people who seemed as though they could be Naota's father and grandfather.

Ninamori bowed. "Good evening." When she raised her head and saw Naota's father's face, she let out a yelp. It was definitely the shady man who'd handed her the magazine earlier.

"Ah, it's you," Kamon said. "Well, sit down. It's not much, but it's dinner."

What's going on? Ninamori wondered. *I thought he was really dodgy, but now it turns out he's Naota's father.*

"Naota's girlfriend?" Shigekuni asked. "Not bad."

"Haruko ran her over," Naota explained.

Kamon wore an uneasy expression and seemed so unnerved that it was almost funny. "What do you mean, 'ran her over'?"

"Hey hey, let's not worry about the details," Haruko suggested. "Let's eat!"

With that, they all found their seats and started dinner.

A family dinner was a little unusual for Ninamori, as sitting down as a family for an evening meal had become a thing of the past for her. She wasn't terribly fond of the magazine man, but she'd told herself to behave for the time being.

Although she was on her best behavior, Ninamori suddenly started crying. It wasn't out of sadness, however; it was because of the spiciness of the curry. *Spicy! Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot!* Ninamori moaned to herself.

It was as painfully spicy as Naota had warned it would be, and must have been several—no, many, many levels beyond Ninamori's curry bread in spiciness. It well exceeded the limits of what humans could tolerate.

Through her tears, Ninamori forced a smile. When she thought about it, though, it was funny. She'd managed to hold back her tears the entire day and hadn't imagined that such a stupid thing would

make her cry. There was no withstanding *this,* however. Ninamori simply ignored the tears that flowed freely and continued to partake of the strong spiciness that even made her head hurt.

"You're doing pretty well there, Shigekuni," Kamon remarked, shoving his spoon in his mouth as though he, too, were forcing himself to eat the curry.

Shigekuni appeared to be pained, but kept eating nonetheless. "You know, I think even Indian people would be surprised by this!"

The reason Kamon and Shigekuni were eating without making a single complaint was because Haruko was watching them. Like longtime romantic rivals, they couldn't disagree when she asked if the curry was good.

"You like spicy foods, right?" Haruko asked Ninamori. "It's Manhattan-flavor 'Star Prince Goes to New York' curry!"

"You didn't have to go as far as New York," Naota grumbled. He was the only one who hadn't touched the curry. He'd eaten only the white rice and pickles—his way of protesting, apparently.

"You're such a kid! It's an adult flavor," Ninamori explained to Naota before putting some into her mouth. To tout how much more mature she was than her classmate, the Marquis de Carabas gobbled the spicy curry, pretending it was completely normal.

"Hey, w-water . . ." Shigekuni stammered.

Immediately following Shigekuni's plea, there was a noise in the nearby kitchen, meaning that someone else was there.

Who is it? Could it be that high school girl, Mamimi? Ninamori wondered.

It turned out to be Canti, who was carrying some cups on a tray into the dining room.

Ninamori was more surprised than when she'd first seen Kamon here. "What *is* that?"

Who could blame her reaction? It was a robot, after all—a two-legged, two-armed humanoid robot. Plus, it was wearing an old jacket and was acting unusually human.

The robot handed a cup of water to Shigekuni.

"Wh-what is that?" Ninamori asked.

"It's our television," Kamon explained.

It was true that its head resembled a television.

"But why is it walking around?"

"Because it's a TV walkman, of course," Kamon replied dubiously.

TV walkman? Does Sony sell that kind of stuff in stores now? Ninamori wondered.

"Anyway," Kamon said to Ninamori, "how are you feeling, Little Miss Mayor?"

Ninamori was taken aback, realizing the meaning behind Kamon's words. Naota's father had known she was the mayor's daughter all along, and with that knowledge, he'd *still* handed her the magazine revealing her father's scandal. Ninamori felt even more disgusted by him. If she hadn't known he was Naota's father, she would've run off immediately.

"You know a lot about Ninamori," Naota remarked, slightly surprised. "How do you know her?"

It came as a surprise to Naota that Kamon knew anything about Ninamori. He had no idea that it was his own father who'd produced that magazine. The name of Kamon's serialized mini-comic magazine, *Come on Mabase,* was meant to mimic "Kamon Mabase."

Wearing a shady expression, Kamon asked Ninamori, "You're pretty famous now, aren't you?"

Ninamori could only stare in horror. The reason she was "pretty famous now" was all because of that comic. That Kamon could say those words with such a calm face proved that he was a

pretty disgusting excuse for a man. However, the Marquis de Carabas wouldn't lower herself to such levels. "No, it isn't really a big deal or anything," she replied modestly.

"Don't go spreading rumors about being hit by the bakery bike, okay?" Haruko urged lightheartedly.

"H-hitting a pedestrian..." Kamon stammered as his abominable expression turned to one of unease.

Haruko's words seemed to have shot down Kamon's proud attitude. Having published the mayor's scandal out of self-righteousness, Kamon felt disheartened that his own housekeeper had been involved in an accident with the mayor's daughter.

Ninamori had been bailed out ever so slightly. As she began to come to terms with the fact that she'd, indeed, been run over, she wondered exactly who this strange girl who made Kamon uneasy was. In her head, Ninamori compared the girl with the secretary who'd fooled around with her father. They were about the same age, but the girl was completely different.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Kamon suddenly suggested. "Forget all the terrible things at home, right?"

"It isn't a big deal," Ninamori replied.

"No, no, no. You must stay with us tonight. I'll give your parents a call. You can sleep soundly and forget about all the bad things—like getting run over."

"Thank you very much, but you don't have to phone them."

"But it would be a bit—"

"It's all right."

"They don't know where you are..."

"My parents are my parents. I'm me," Ninamori asserted. "If my father gets arrested by the police or divorces my mother, it has absolutely nothing to do with me!"

Canti stared worriedly at the girl as she spat out her words.

After dinner, Kamon half suggested, half forced Ninamori to take a bath at the Nandaba house. "It's been a bad day, hasn't it? You should at least take a bath to relax. When I wanted to escape my home life, I used to take a bath to get over everything," Kamon revealed.

Because Ninamori really was worn out, and because this was none other than Naota's bathroom, she decided to take a bath, if only to satisfy her curiosity.

The Nandabas' home was an old wooden house, and the bathroom was well used. Compared to the one Ninamori had at home, it was pretty small. Even so, when she got into the hot tub, she felt herself relax a little. (The after-effects of that super spicy curry that'd brought tears to her eyes started to subside, too.)

After letting out a drawn-out sigh, Ninamori began to reflect on her day in the unfamiliar bathtub. As she began to feel a little better, she started to realize that lamenting over the unfortunate things that had befallen her wouldn't help her in any way. In the end, whatever was going to happen would happen. *"Yes, calm down and take a good look around. You're bound to find something good, meow,* Ninamori thought. *This house is full of surprises: that maid, cat ears, a father who makes scandalous magazines, and a TV walkman.*

"How's the water?"

Ninamori panicked when she heard Kamon speaking to her from behind the glass partition. *No way!* she thought, but it was true—Kamon had opened the glass door and peeked in without even asking. Flustered, she crossed her arms over her chest, becoming more frightened as she felt the perverted man's eyes scan her skin. *What do I*

do? My first impression was correct! This old man is a perv like I thought. That's why he wanted me to take a bath!

"Do you think I'm a bad person?"

Ninamori sat shuddering in silence.

"You don't resent me, do you?"

Resent you? Ninamori said to herself.

"You don't, right?"

"Because of you, that horrible secretary finally left my house."

"Little Eri, you really are a grown-up," Kamon declared admiringly.

Little Eri . . . Naota's father spoke in a creepy tone as if he were talking to a cat.

Kamon stretched out his hand and offered Ninamori something. "Here, use this."

Although she was slightly hesitant, Ninamori covered her chest with one arm and reached out with the other to retrieve the offered item. It was a child's shower hat.

When Naota opened the door to his room, Ninamori was fresh out of the bath, sitting on the chair in Naota's pajamas. Her legs and arms were longer than Naota's, so the pajamas were too short and didn't cover her wrists or ankles.

"You're wearing glasses," Naota noticed. He'd never seen the class president wearing glasses, so he was surprised. He had no idea her eyes were bad. She must've worn contacts normally.

"Our secret."

"You have something to hide?"

Ninamori had worn glasses since around the time she'd modeled for the ad. Maybe she felt more averse to people knowing

about her wearing glasses than she did about them knowing about her father's scandal. There was something special about only Naota knowing such a deep secret of hers, though.

"You do, too."

"What?"

"Well, I'm in your room, wearing your pajamas." Ninamori looked smug, as though she were victorious. "It's pretty weird, huh?"

"Really?" Naota sat on the bed with a carefree face, but he was panicking on the inside. Ninamori, straight out of the bath, was in his pajamas and in his room. As she'd pointed out, it was pretty weird. Sharing a secret was the first step to having a relationship beyond the ordinary. They'd suddenly entered into one such special relationship.

This isn't good. This really is not good, Naota thought.

"You'd better not tell anyone else in class," Ninamori warned.

"Of course not," Naota replied, instinctively raising his voice. "If people found out, who knows what they'd say. Starting tomorrow, you shouldn't come near me for a while."

"But tonight, it's okay." For some inexplicable reason, Ninamori got up from the chair and sat next to Naota.

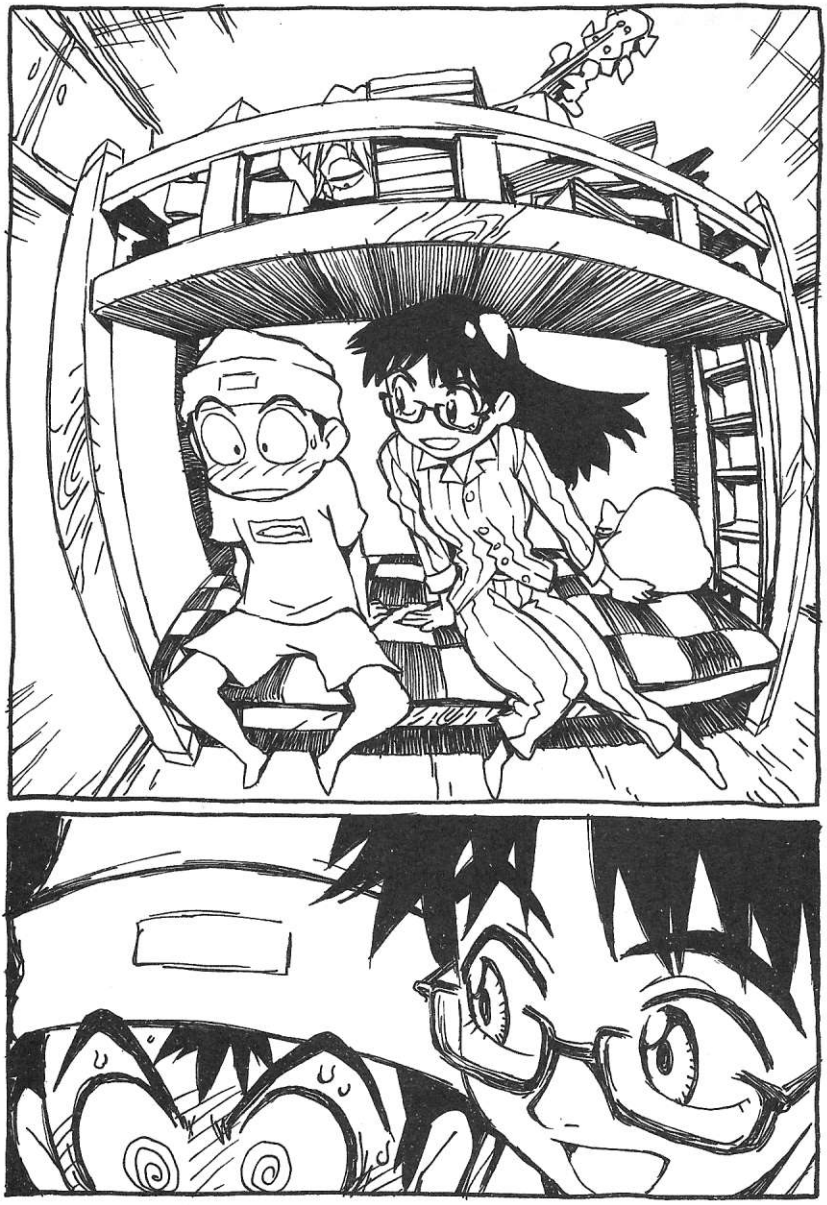
His heart pounding at being alone on a bed with a girl, Naota thought he was in a dangerous situation. *Tonight it's okay? What does that mean?*

"I'll sleep downstairs," Naota said coldly and stood up.

Ninamori grabbed his arm. "Wait. Stay here a little longer. I didn't mean it like that. It's an unfamiliar room and I only need to relax a little."

How did I get myself into this situation? This is so not cool. Worried that he and Ninamori would become the gossip of the school, Naota knocked her hand away.

"Go home. This isn't okay. It's too weird," Naota insisted.



Ninamori, somewhat annoyed, decided to play her final card. "What's weird is what you have on your head."

Naota instinctively pulled his hat on tighter. He'd been wearing it the entire time he'd been in the house. *She's seen my cat ears. It must've been when the bike hit me earlier. Damn! This really isn't good.*

"You saw it?" Naota asked.

"What is it?"

"What is it you saw?"

"Cat ears—perfect for playing a cat!"

"I told you, I'm not doing the play. Anyway, why was I chosen to play a cat?" Naota moaned.

"You didn't notice I rigged the voting, huh?" Ninamori replied with a sharp smile.

"What?"

"No one suspected that I, the class president, would do such a thing, right?"

"You mean the class vote on who would play . . . ?"

"I'm the lead role—and you're the cat."

Naota had thought it was strange at the time. It was a bit unlikely that the class would have chosen the cool Naota to play the cat. There was no reason someone like him should play such a comic character. Things made more sense knowing they'd been altered by trickery, though. Even so, Naota still couldn't understand why Ninamori was so obsessed with the play.

"You're not mad, are you?" she asked.

"Why did I have to be the cat? And why did you want to play the lead role so bad?"

"The Marquis de Carabas deceives the princess for happiness, never once revealing who he really is. He lives the lie and finds happiness. The lie becomes the truth. Isn't that nice?"

Just as Ninamori said, *Puss in Boots* is the tale of a poor young man who borrows a cat's wisdom and becomes a success story. The hero, who gets close to the princess under false pretences, is, to put it unkindly, a con artist.

Suddenly, the pair heard a girl's voice: "Is that really okay, meow?"

Glancing up, they noticed that at some point, Haruko had laid down on the top bunk.

"You were there before?" Ninamori asked.

"I was here, meow," Haruko replied.

"You've been listening the entire time?"

"Not really. Why would I care that you cheated to get the lead role, meow?"

"It isn't as if I hurt anyone!" Ninamori insisted in a defensive tone that belied her inner guilt.

"You hurt me!" Naota argued.

"I'll keep your secret, meow, if you keep his, meow," Haruko proposed.

"Who is your maid?" Ninamori inquired all of a sudden.

It was a question that Naota wanted the answer to, as well. *Really, who is she?*

"Where does your maid sleep?"

"Here, meow."

"You sleep there every night?"

"Yes, right here—every night with Takkun. Ahhhh!" Haruko replied, pulling off Naota's hat and stroking his cat ears.

"Stop that! Don't touch them! They . . ." Although Naota attempted to protest, he appeared to be somewhat happy.

This woman was a completely different kettle of fish compared to the secretary, but as Ninamori watched Haruko and Naota play, she knew she was up against another enemy.

Marquis de Carabas

CHAPTER 4

It was dark again. There was no light—no one there. Time had stopped. He stood in a dark place, but he'd been to this dark place before.

Yes, he knew it well. This was the darkness in which he mustn't turn around—the darkness in which he couldn't turn around. If he turned around, that girl would never come back again.

Girl? What girl?

If he listened closely, he could hear something—a murmuring.

There seemed to be a river flowing in front of him. At the center of the darkness, the surface of the river had gradually lit up.

There happened to be something floating in the river. It was a cat floating in a cardboard box.

He ran out quickly. He had to help her. There wasn't any time. He couldn't catch her, though, and the box with the cat in it had begun disappearing into the darkness. Although he knew it was futile, he chased the cat as fast as his legs would allow, because if he couldn't save it, the cat would be carried to the depths of the never-ending darkness, swallowed by the abyss.

He had to catch up . . . had to catch up. He had to save her. In spite of the urgency, he started to tire and finally collapsed in the darkness.

It wasn't any good. He couldn't chase any longer. The cat had already disappeared and the river was also disappearing. Once again, everything was becoming utter blackness.

"You came all this way, didn't you, Your Highness?"

Standing in front of him was Miyu Miyu, wearing boots.

"I'm not Your Highness," he answered as the Nandaba pet cat shook its head.

"No, you are, Your Highness—the proof of that being your ears are donkey ears."

"I don't have donkey ears."

"Remove the crown you're wearing from your head and see for yourself."

"My head . . . a crown?

But I can't take this off. I can't take this off! he panicked.

"Why can't you take off the crown? If you don't have donkey ears, why can't you take it off? Your Highness, you're a liar. As punishment, you will be food for the man-eating demon."

"Man-eating demon?" He asked, sensing someone. Before he knew it, the man-eating demon was coming at him from behind. When he turned around, the man-eating demon was a girl riding a Vespa and carrying a metal guitar. She had a bloodthirsty laugh, and her red mouth was wide open.

"Stop it! Stop!" he yelled with all his might, but the man-eating demon closed in on him.

Smooch! Haruko kissed Naota's sleeping face, which caused all his classmates around him to start giggling.

Having been asleep for half an hour, Naota lifted his head from his desk, finally noticing the presence of Haruko and Canti in front of him. *What?*

Naota was in a classroom after school on a Saturday. He'd been searching for an opportunity to escape so he could skip rehearsal, but he must have fallen asleep at some point. *Why are Haruko and Canti here?* he wondered.

Holding ukuleles and other stage props, Naota's classmates stood in a semicircle, watching him from a short distance. Among the crowd was Ninamori, who'd stayed over at the Nandaba residence the night before. She wore a foul expression and was glaring at Naota and Haruko.

"Sh-she just smooched him, didn't she?"

"It's a robot!"

"Is someone in it?"

"Who's that lady who smooched him?"

Hearing the voices of his peers, Naota finally grasped the situation. He realized it hadn't been a dream when someone had kissed him, prompting him to touch his cheek instinctively a moment ago. *What's going on?*

It seemed that Haruko and Canti had come together, Haruko kissing Naota while he was sleeping, with all his classmates watching.

What's going on?

"What are you doing? Here's your lunch," Haruko said as she took the lunchbox Canti had been carrying and offered it to Naota. "Saturday rehearsal, huh? I'm such a good housemaid, aren't I?"

"Ugh, whatever. I'm not doing any dumb rehearsal."

"Well, you still need to eat lunch."

"I don't need it. I'm out of here."

"No, you can't ditch today."

In an overt display of strictness, Ninamori cut in between Naota and Haruko. "Everyone decided this was how we were going to do it!"

Ninamori's voice was loud, but her classmates didn't find it odd that she had reacted so emotionally. No one said anything, although everyone now knew about her father's scandal and had noticed Ninamori was paying more attention to Naota recently.

"I won't let you go," Ninamori insisted, grabbing Naota's arm. That she would do such a thing to prevent him from skipping rehearsal was a reasonable thing for a responsible class president to do.

As for the other students, the question at the moment wasn't whether Naota would skip class, but the identity of the girl who'd

kissed him so shamelessly and the story behind the robot she'd brought with her.

"More important, what's with the robot?"

"Isn't that the Vespa girl?"

"No way . . ."

Haruko and Canti, who'd suddenly appeared in the classroom, made quite an impressive combo. However, Ninamori was blasé about the maid and the TV walkman, having stayed at the Nandabas' house the night before. As Haruko and Canti were familiar characters to her, she was far more stressed over Naota.

"You have to do what we decided!" Ninamori ordered Naota.

"You must be joking! I have things to do!"

"Everyone is coming."

"No one will come to see this play!"

"They will!"

"They won't!"

"I want them to see it!"

"Because you're a show-off!"

"My father and mother are coming to see it together!"

It's so embarrassing, but it makes me happy when Dad and Mom come together to see me, too. Now I see—Ninamori is looking forward to her parents enjoying the play together, Naota thought.

Unfortunately, Naota had already gotten caught up in the emotion of the moment and shouted, "School plays are for kids!"

"*You're* a kid! You can't even eat spicy foods!"

"Playing a cat is embarrassing!"

Enraged, Ninamori pulled off Naota's hat. "How can you say that when you have a head like this?"

As a result of Ninamori's ruthlessness, everyone got to take a close look at Naota's head, and of course, everyone saw that he had cat ears.

They saw them! Naota thought in horror. Although he'd taken great care to hide them, everyone had found out that he had cat ears growing out of his head. He hoped that if he covered the unsightly things with his hands, no one would believe from merely a glimpse that he actually had cat ears. They all would simply shake their heads, wondering why someone as cool as Naota would want to wear such an ugly hat on his head. *They'll think they didn't see properly,* Naota assured himself. There was always a way out . . . always a way out.

In mid-panic, Naota let his mouth get away from him. "You're one to talk. You're the one who rigged the votes so you could play the lead role!"

Ninamori's face froze and turned white.

Within seconds, the classmates' eyes moved from Haruko to Canti to Naota's cat ears, before stopping and staring at Ninamori—or so she felt.

"Argh!" the class president screamed, clutching her head and doubling over.

At the same time, Haruko's chain link that was attached to the bracelet on her left hand started to move, reacting strongly like a magnet, and then pointing toward Ninamori. Haruko's green eyes became unusually serious and had a cruel glint to them.

Ninamori's body started to convulse, and suddenly, all the onlookers noticed a strange change: Her pores started to ooze out sweat before their eyes.

Several girls ran to Ninamori and screamed into her face.

"Eri? Are you okay?"

"Get her to the nurse!"

"Owww!" Ninamori screamed in pain.

Much to her classmates' horror, Ninamori began to transform. Somehow, cat ears suddenly started to grow from Ninamori's head.

"A magic trick?" asked one of the girls who'd rushed over.

The person who was most surprised, however, was Naota. The cat ears that were now growing out of Ninamori's head matched his exactly. But when Naota put his hands to his head, his cat ears were gone.

Meanwhile, at the MM factory, which Ninamori's father had lured to the city back when he was committing fraud, the battle watch commenced once again. It was a Saturday, so there wasn't a single person working in the building. The warning siren blared to no one. In one of the rooms, the host computer started to receive battle reports.

<<MMR Class [L].PS, whose appearance was halted at the cranium, has found another exit that has opened at close distance. At short notice, testing the change in approach. 13:13.

In addition, presence of MMR Class [K].001 Atomsk is confirmed at the expected area of emergence. 13:13.

Executing the capture or destruction of [K] 13:13.

Good luck to PS in executing battle strategy. 13:13.>>

Ninamori screamed as the insuppressible transformation took over her body.

Not knowing what was going on, her classmates stood there dumbfounded. Only Naota understood what was happening to Ninamori's body.

The spectacle was analogous to seeing a monster jump out of someone's head.

Naota guessed that, at the moment, Ninamori was probably hearing a loud ringing in her ears and was having to deal with the horrible feeling of her own head pulsing. He'd experienced it twice in recent past, after all. The first time, the robot Canti, who was standing beside him, had jumped out; and the second time, the one-armed robot Canti ultimately damaged had jumped out.

Wait, Naota thought. *Does this mean a strange robot is going to leap out of Ninamori's head—in the middle of the day, in the classroom?*

Ninamori's cat ears were extending up to the ceiling in the form of long metal arms. The bits everyone assumed were ears were actually more like foam pads attached to the tips of the arms. There weren't only two arms, either. Another one resembling the first two had appeared at the back of Ninamori's head, making a total of three.

Each arm bent at the joints, and the suction pads at the ends latched onto the classroom floor. It was very reminiscent of a camera tripod—a gigantic tripod, actually. Ninamori's head attached at the center, where the three legs joined, and her body suspended in midair. Extending from her gym shorts, her long legs didn't touch the floor and were violently kicking the air with all their might.

No one continued to think this was some sort of magic trick.

Suddenly, an elongated egg-shaped metal ball popped out from Ninamori's head at the center of the three legs, causing gasps of surprise from her classmates. Well, of course—the metal ball was several times larger than the girl's head. This was the first time Naota had witnessed such a large metal monster appear from such a small portal. It was an absolutely grotesque scene. It seemed as though "they" were able to distort space to pass through.

The robot revealed itself completely. It was probably a robot, anyway, as it wasn't human-shaped. Its form resembled a three-legged





octopus more than anything else. The three legs bent considerably, no doubt because the thing had to stoop down on account of the classroom ceiling being too low.

Lemon squeezer, Naota thought. On the only occasion he'd visited Mamimi's house with his brother, Naota remembered Mamimi's family had a lemon squeezer that looked very similar.

Everything above Ninamori's nose was melded into the robot's rounded body. As if she'd lost all power to fight back, her legs and arms were covered in sweat and dangling limply. The only things that moved were her lips to breathe.

I have to do something. I have to separate Ninamori from this lemon squeezer thing, Naota told himself.

When the one-armed robot had appeared, Naota's head hadn't fully separated either, and he'd lingered on the border between life and death for a short while. Ninamori's situation felt a lot more urgent, though. The lemon squeezer was treating Ninamori as if she were part of its own body.

<<PS has integrated the route device as part of its own body 13:14.

No problems with battle movement. 13:14.

Possibility that the route device's conscience will interfere with the control systems . . . >>

Ninamori's classmates stared, speechless, at the transformed body of their class president.

All of a sudden, the lemon squeezer started moving, heading straight for Naota.

"Argh!" Naota grimaced, finding himself pinned against the wall by the monster's amazingly quick movements.

For some reason, the lemon squeezer was trying to push a part of its metal body onto Naota's mouth. It almost appeared as if it were trying to kiss him.

"What are you doing? Stop that now, Ninamori!"

The class' homeroom teacher, Miyaji, screamed hysterically, and the lemon squeezer immediately stopped moving. Miyaji, who'd come to oversee the play rehearsal, had observed the chaos and decided it was Ninamori's doing.

"If I'd known it was going to turn out like this . . ." Haruko gave a little tut that she hadn't brought her guitar weapon with her, but she was relieved when she noticed one of the boys nearby had a ukulele in his hand that he'd been using as a stage prop. "Let me borrow that," Haruko demanded, snatching the ukulele and raising it high above her head.

Unfortunately, simply because Haruko held the ukulele in her hand didn't mean it was going to turn into a super weapon. The moment she brought the instrument down on the metal robot's body, it splintered into tiny bits. "Ukulele no good." After uttering such a nonsensical statement, Haruko whistled with all her might.

In a flash, the Vespa that had been parked outside Shigekuni Bread started its engine, turned on its lights, and drove off.

There wasn't anyone on the scooter, so it had to have been summoned by Haruko's whistle.

The driverless Vespa headed straight for Mabase Elementary School.

The classroom had descended into a panic.

The lemon squeezer had integrated Ninamori's body as a functioning part of its own and was running wild.

Moving like a bug's jaw, the two pale schoolgirl legs gnawed at Naota's body.

"Let me go!" Naota insisted, trying to pry apart Ninamori's legs, which were wrapped around him tightly.

Haruko snickered cheerfully as she looked on. "Ooooh, that looks dirty!"

With Naota still in its grips, the lemon squeezer aimed its sensor eye at Canti. It seemed the control system had merged with an impure entity and had meaninglessly captured the young boy; however, it suddenly remembered what its original prey was.

With an exaggerated holler, Haruko jumped into the corridor with Canti by her side.

Still holding onto Naota, the lemon squeezer used its remaining three legs to chase the antagonistic duo.

"Let me go!" echoed Naota's futile scream down the corridor.

After kicking open the metal hatchway and exiting onto the roof, the lemon squeezer searched the surroundings for its fugitive prey.

"Up here!" yelled Haruko, gazing down from the water tower. Behind her, like a faithful dog, was her Vespa. Haruko smiled cruelly before opening the Vespa seat and retrieving her guitar-shaped, time-space interference weapon from the storage space. "Better get ready. Time to meet your maker!"

"Stop!" Naota screamed, still in the lemon squeezer's clutches. He already assumed Haruko wouldn't spare a thought for him or Ninamori and would go all out in her attack on the lemon squeezer.

Naota was right. With an evil smirk, Haruko started the hand-operated generator on her weapon.

Sensing the threat from its opponent's shining weapon, the lemon squeezer took a few steps back and prepared to fling Naota in the direction of Haruko. Ninamori's long legs hurled Naota's body, turning it into a weapon.

"Waaahhh!" Naota screamed as he shot through the air.

"Get out of my way!" Haruko demanded, mercilessly knocking Naota aside. It was only a halfhearted swing, but it nevertheless sent Naota's body high up into the air like a fly ball. That guitar was a terrifying weapon.

"Hiii-ya!" With her super weapon in hand, Haruko leapt from the water tower and used all her strength to inflict a blow on the lemon squeezer's round body.

All of a sudden, a lightning-like bolt illuminated the midday roof. Immediately afterward, the lemon squeezer began to emit a cranking sound as though something wasn't working properly, and it then began to move irregularly, stumbling around the rooftop without direction. It appeared to be in great pain.

"Uggghhh!" Practically in sync with the lemon squeezer's groans of pain, Ninamori began shrieking in anguish. Her legs thrashed about, and her body twisted and squirmed as if she were being administered electric shock treatment. The violent thrashing alone would've been enough to break her bones, but fortunately, the struggling girl managed to separate her body from the lemon squeezer before falling limply to the ground.

Haruko smiled boldly.

In the meantime, Naota, who'd been thrown high into the air, was thinking that he must be the most unfortunate person in the entire world. His misfortunes seemed to have infinite variations. After Naota reached the apex of his flight, his body made a small arch and was pulled down by gravity.

Canti stood on the roof at Naota's exact point of landing, as if the robot had been predicting the boy's course all along. Opening up a part of his frame, the robot gobbled up Naota's flying body. It was a nice catch.

In an instant, Canti's dark blue body changed to a deep crimson, and his humanoid appearance once again evolved into a giant cannon, the form it took when he was in autonomic gun mode.

The fight was decided in a single shot. At light speed, a red laser shot out from near Canti's cannon mouth, locking onto the position of the lemon squeezer. With a great blast, the cannon ball pierced straight through the middle of the lemon squeezer's metal body, destroying it, and proceeding to create a gigantic hole in the roof of the school gymnasium on the other side.

"Oh, that takes me back. I was in a play when I was in middle school. This is the picture my father took of me in the lead role. The cat boy—he was my first love. He's kind of cute, isn't he? It's nice that you can say such things lightly as you get older. Oh and that—that's not a spotlight. When we did a performance, there was a big hole in the gymnasium roof, and that's the light coming in. I look pretty tall, don't I? I was the tallest in the class then, you know. And the glasses, they were . . ."

A couple of days later, class one of the sixth grade at Mabase Elementary School performed *Puss in Boots.*

The tension mounted as the sound of the announcer's voice and the echo of applause filled the hall.

Ninamori was at the side of the stage dressed in costume, waiting for her entrance. In the end, it was decided that the play would be performed with Ninamori in the lead role. No one in the class ever mentioned the rigging of the votes again.

There wasn't sufficient evidence to prosecute Ninamori's father, either, so he continued as city mayor. Ninamori didn't completely object to her father's shameless attitude, however. She was his daughter, so she would grow up more brazen than her father ever was.

"You cheated to get the lead role?"

"You became a robotic monster and ran amuck?"

Ninamori's father had told her she should transfer if she didn't like all the rumors that were going around, but Ninamori stayed in town. That was Eri Ninamori's decision at the age of twelve.

"You'll do wonderfully, Ninamori," Miyaji encouraged her.

Ninamori nodded.

Dressed as the cat, Naota seemed surprised when he saw Ninamori's face. She was wearing glasses. The role of the Marquis de Carabas didn't require glasses, so why was she performing wearing the very glasses she'd tried to hide before?

Ninamori poked her finger through the rim of the glasses, showing Naota there were no lenses. They were fake.

Why? Not understanding, Naota cocked his head.

Suddenly, a bell rang and the curtain lifted.

Ready to play the part she'd rehearsed to perfection, Ninamori took a step out onto the stage.

Full Swing

CHAPTER 1

On a cool, breezy autumn afternoon, Naota Nandaba was sitting on a bench on the first- base side of the baseball field near Mabase River, waiting for his turn to bat.

The uniform Naota was wearing was that of the town's amateur baseball team, the Mabase Martians. Their opponents that day were the Umaguma Fragments, their fated rivals from the next town over.

The game was in the throes of its final innings, and the Martians were at bat. The scoreboard showed that the Fragments had a large lead against the opposing Martians, who had yet to score a run.

"This is pathetic," commented old man Shigekuni, who sat on the bench wearing a Martians uniform. Naota's grandfather, Shigekuni, was the Mabase Martians' coach.

Although they were now perennial bottom-dwellers, the Martians were a legendary team around the time they'd entered the local amateur baseball league, as they'd formerly monopolized the top spot. The old players' proudest moment had been in 1988, when they'd defeated PL Gakuen, the strongest school historically, in a practice game. (It was all talk, however. No one could be sure if it'd actually happened.) At the time, their team had been dominated by their ace pitcher and cleanup hitter, Shigekuni.

The reason Naota had come on as a substitute player for his grandfather's amateur league team was essentially because Shigekuni had forced him into it.

"This is *really* pathetic. The Martians lineup used to be compared to the eruption of the active volcano Mount Olympus. Now, we can't even score one run."

This season, the Martians were at the bottom of the league again. As the winter progressed, they would continue rewriting the record for most time spent at the bottom. Their best hope was to win the three-game series against the Fragments that started today, which meant their longstanding rivals would have to repeatedly lose against the Martians.

"Although you said it wouldn't make a difference," the player who was sitting next to Shigekuni said unsupportively, "I think we expected more out of the sub."

Upon hearing the player's comment, Naota, who was sitting on one side of the bench, began to feel uncomfortable. The thing was, each time Naota had batted, he'd struck out—when he was looking, no less.

"That sub hasn't swung the bat once!"

"Active volcano? More like a dormant volcano."

The players complained, each adding something more insulting than the previous remark. They started griping about how they were always going to be losers, and that their offensive rhythm had gone out of whack when Naota was inserted into the lineup.

Shigekuni gazed at Naota with disappointed eyes.

It was never meant to be, Naota thought, wearing his hand-me-down uniform. Fully aware of his own batting inability, it wasn't a complete surprise that he'd struck out. What was surprising was the difference in expectations that his teammates had of him.

Shineguni had pressured Naota into joining the team, claiming that the sport was "amateur baseball," but the teams were full of adults. An elementary school kid like Naota was bound to be ridiculed for being filler, and would probably be relegated to playing right field and ninth. A substitute player was merely another head to meet player requirements.

Naota failed to grasp the impact his revered brother Tasuku, who was now in America playing baseball, had left on this amateur baseball team from a very young age. Tasuku had been a legendary boy substitute who'd pulled off miraculous wins for the team time and time again, when he was even younger than Naota was now.

As soon as Tasuku had entered middle school, he became busy with his own sports activities, so the amateur baseball team had

refrained from asking him to be a substitute. There was a sustained tragic plea from the weakening team for the great Tasuku to return, though.

Ultimately, the team's plea was in vain, as Tasuku had gone to America. Eventually, the team had started talking about the existence of Naota, Tasuku's younger brother. They'd heard he always walked around with a bat, and those who saw him became fired up with great expectations.

"The little brother of the genius baseball player Tasuku Nandaba still carries a bat around with him. The moment we've prayed for is here. . . ." And so it went: Suddenly, Naota had the cleanup spot, and a lot of overblown expectations placed upon him.

The reality was that Naota's baseball skills, even among boys his own age, weren't particularly high. Actually, the truth was that they were pretty low. Naota knew this, of course—that's why as soon as he learned he'd be wearing his brother's uniform and number, he got a sinking feeling. Naota became easily frustrated if people he interacted with on a daily basis held a low opinion of him. Being expected to do great things in an unfamiliar territory and ultimately failing was an especially brutal kind of agony.

The third batter had struck out, and it was Naota's turn to bat. Standing in the batter's box, he gripped the special bat he'd brought. Because Naota always carried his brother's bat, everyone expected him to be as good at baseball as his brother was. However, aside from one practice swing, Naota had never swung the bat during a game. The special bat was only for holding. Naota's swing wasn't even something his brother had taught him; it was something he'd made up himself.

I'm sorry I'm a dormant volcano, Naota thought remorsefully.

He could hear supporters' voices coming from the bench.

"Whack it, Tasuku's brother!"

"Just get on base, Tasuku's brother!"

Not one person called Naota by his name. His name in this game was simply "Tasuku's brother."

Out of nowhere, a terrifying fastball came hurtling toward Naota, who remained uncomfortably in his stance. Exactly like his other times at bat, he couldn't do anything except stand there with his bat in hand and watch the ball fly by.

"Strike!" the umpire shouted.

The opposing team's bench applauded.

Naota stared at the pitcher, who was grinning menacingly, and attempted to catch his breath. The Fragments' pitcher was, surprisingly, Haruko Haruhara.

Haruko, who'd become the Nandabas' housemaid, was dressed in a Fragments uniform and faced Naota on the mound. Feeling full of herself, Haruko blew a kiss to her supporters on the bench, causing the old men on the opposing team to go wild with joy. They were lovestruck. Haruko and her aged admirers were just like a pop star and her fan club.

The tall Haruko had a great style, and her uniformed figure certainly was attractive. It wasn't a big surprise that old men would enjoy watching her move around, throwing and batting as she played. In fact, every motion Haruko's arms and legs made completely captivated men of all ages on the Martians bench. Observing the scene, Naota felt somewhat proud of her. The same Haruko everyone was admiring lived with Naota in his room and had even performed CPR on him. The roommates had a special relationship, and when Naota remembered that, feelings of superiority managed to overtake his feelings of futility.

"Strike two!" the umpire yelled.

As expected, Naota hadn't moved an inch in response to the second pitch. Anyone could see that he didn't intend to swing. His

own team was heckling him with questions like, "What on Earth do you think you're doing?"

From Naota's point of view, Haruko Haruhara was a monster that had fought strange robots to draws or victory. He wasn't even considering trying to hit a ball thrown by that fiend. Regardless of whether he could follow the pitch with his eyes, there was no way Naota was going to be able to hit the ball. There wasn't any point in attempting the impossible—that was all there was to it.

Haruko's control was also good. Up until now, Naota had gone down with three pitches, which meant that he'd suffered three strikes each time at bat.

At least I'm smart enough to realize it's useless, Naota reasoned. *Nobody here knows how amazing this girl is. I'm the only one. . . .*

Staring at Haruko's form as she threw the ball post-windup, Naota's vision suddenly went black. His body felt light, and soon, he felt a blunt, heavy pain in his head. *No, don't tell me "that" started again!* What he feared was the extraordinary spectacle of a robot coming out of his head. Naota feared that the process had begun again (which had recently become an obsessive habit that he couldn't snap out of).

As soon as the umpire called out, "Take your base!" Naota began to understand the situation.

The pitch had struck Naota's head, and he'd collapsed in the batter's box. That was all there was to it.

After being replaced by a pinch runner, Naota returned to the bench. To be safe, Naota wound a bandage around his head.

That was a pretty dangerous pitch, Naota said to himself. As he watched Haruko on the mound with a sulky face, he heard a camera

shutter behind him. Canti was standing behind Naota and, for some reason, had taken a picture of Naota's bandaged head. The robot had a tendency to do things for no reason whatsoever.

The photo developed instantly and printed out from part of the robot's body. It was an X-ray, and the white circle in the middle of the black film was Naota's skull. Canti nodded happily while reviewing the picture.

Staring at the robot, one of the players commented, "Taking X-rays of players during a game seems a bit dangerous."

"It's one of the machines MM makes, isn't it?" another player asked, studying the logo on Canti's chest. "Is the radiation safe?"

"Does MM do weapons research for the American military?"

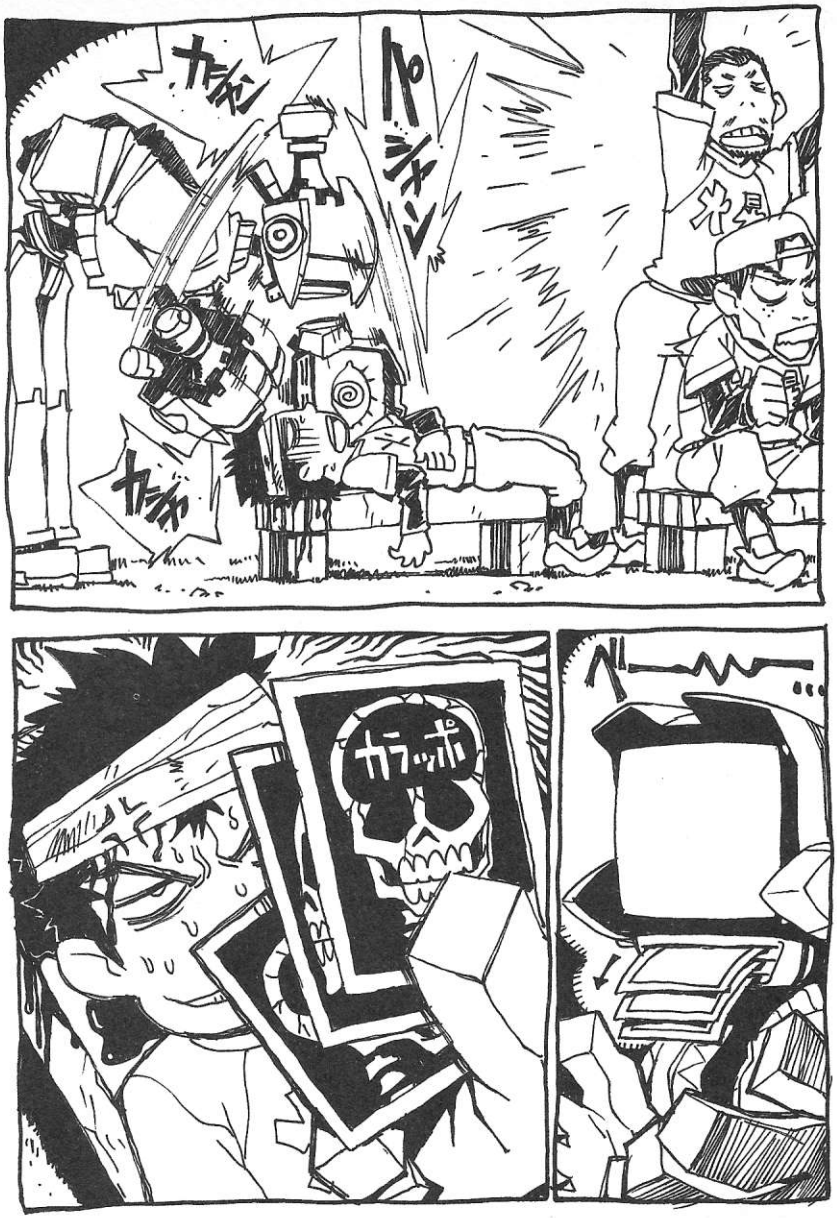
"Hey, we started losing right around the time that the plant was finished!"

Canti's reputation wasn't very good among the Martians. Everyone was suspicious of this robot that wandered around town, whose true colors and intentions were unknown. To make matters worse, because the Martians were a team based in an older shopping district, they were critical of anything MM.

"Cut it out," Shigekuni ordered, feeling there was no point in finding fault with such a convenient machine, which would run and fetch things for the team. The players didn't say another word about their coach's possession and stopped the badmouthing of the robot then and there.

The batter who went up after Naota also struck out, and the Martians once again ended their stint at bat without having scored any points.

It was time to take the field again, but Naota, whose head was wrapped in bandages, remained on the bench without going out to play defense. He probably could've said a quick apology and left the game, but he decided to stay and watch the Fragments' turn at bat.


カチン
パシャン
カチン
カラッポ

The first batter up was Haruko, and that alone was enough to warrant watching. After all, Haruko's swing kind of reminded Naota of his awesome brother. It wasn't that Haruko's swing itself was similar to Tasuku's—it was the level of skill with which she swung. Both of their swings were so complete, each the epitome of perfection.

"Hiii-ya!" With a loud shriek, Haruko swung the aluminum bat without holding anything back.

As the ball soared skyward, it was clear to everyone that it was a home run. With another run for the opposing team, the Martians drooped their shoulders. The ball quickly disappeared into the blue sky, and the players gave up trying to follow it with their eyes.

There was something that kept watching the ball for a long time, though—Canti, the robot.

When the game was over, the scoreboard showed a massive difference in scores. It was an overwhelming win for the Umaguma Fragments. Sadly, the Mabase Martians didn't score any points and had suffered indisputable, utter defeat.

Regardless of whether the Martians had won or lost, it was customary for the team to hold a meeting after every game to reflect. Naturally, all the players could talk about this time was Haruko.

"We need a substitute player like that girl."

"Every time she batted, she hit it out of the park!"

"She even hit home runs off our intentional walks."

"Who is that girl, coach?"

Shigekuni usually severely scolded the players after a defeat, but today, he silently gritted his teeth. Of course, he kept it a secret that the girl the team was curious about was his housekeeper.

Shigekuni had been surprised when he'd first seen Haruko wearing a Fragments uniform. He was the person who wondered the most about why she was on the other team. What wound him up was the fact that he and Haruko had been so close, but he'd never known she was so good at baseball.

I have to do something, Shigekuni said to himself. There were still two games left against the Fragments, and something needed to be done, or the Martians were sure to lose all three games. He didn't know what he could do about it, though.

"Wow, take a look at that," one of the players exclaimed.

Upon glancing in the direction the player pointed, Shigekuni saw balls flying into a basket near the bench, one after the other. The sight of the skillfully aimed balls landing one by one in the smallish basket almost seemed to be a trick.

The responsible party ended up being Canti, who'd been instructed to tend to the grounds. The robot had been retrieving the scattered balls and throwing them from long distances.

Shigekuni and his surprised players all stared at one another. It was obvious that everyone was thinking the same thing. The team members quickly got Canti to stop cleaning up the field and gave the robot a glove to see if he would catch some balls.

The team pondered the possibilities of Canti being a real find, but the robot turned out to be *more* than a real find. No matter what kind of fly ball or grounder the players hit at Canti, the robot cleanly fielded it with perfect form, throwing it back. His nimble movements were far better than the Martians had hoped. To top it off, the robot pounded his glove with his fist, as if to say, "Bring it on!" showing he had heart, too.

"He's amazing, coach!"

"With him, we're going to win the next match."

"A hidden jewel, our secret weapon—we're going to ride that robot to victory!"

The players ate up Shigekuni's excited boasts.

"Plus, Tasuku is coming home soon," the proud coach added with conviction.

"Hooray!" yelled the players.

The news of Tasuku's return brought even more joy to the players who'd excitedly observed the robot's prowess. That's how much the amateur baseball team revered Naota's big brother.

Nobody was thinking about the substitute player from earlier any longer. As the team cheered in unison, "Tasuku's brother" stood up and left dejectedly, without anyone noticing.

After walking up an embankment, Naota found a Vespa on the waterside road with Haruko standing by it, counting several bills that looked freshly swindled. The money was probably the reason she'd played in the game earlier. When she saw Naota, she shoved the money into her pocket.

"The bandages look good on you," she said.

It was unlikely that Haruko felt an ounce of responsibility for beaning Naota with the ball. Actually, he could envision her telling him, "You couldn't get out of the way? Gosh, you suck at baseball, Takkun!"—and she did.

"Whatever," Naota sulked. "I don't care about baseball."

"That's not cute at all."

"Stop it," Naota insisted, covering his head.

Haruko reached for her guitar case that was strapped to the Vespa, so Naota thought for sure she was going to hit him as she usually did.

Idiot, don't play around where people can see us. They're going to start gossiping, Naota thought. *Then again, I wonder what the players from both teams who were making fun of me would think if they saw me and Haruko together?*

In the end, Haruko simply slung the guitar over her shoulder, glancing at the bat Naota held in his hand and saying matter-of-factly, "If you don't swing, nothing will happen."

"Well, it isn't as if I can hit your pitches anyway!"

"Takkun, you think you're special, don't you? That's why you don't swing. If you swing, people will know you're not special."

What is she saying? Naota wondered.

Haruko slapped on her helmet and sped off at full speed, leaving Naota standing there.

Shigekuni and the other players had gone somewhere else to hold a second "meeting of reflection," which meant they probably went to the barbeque restaurant near the station.

When Naota made his way back home, he found Haruko on the living room floor, still wearing her uniform, and Kamon massaging her back.

"Ooh, it hurts. Not so haaard," Haruko moaned.

"Sorry, Haruko."

Naota was more than a little shocked by what he saw. Kamon was openly giving a massage to Haruko, who was calmly accepting it, as if it weren't strange whatsoever. It was strange. When had they forged such a comfortable relationship?

"Welcome home, Naota. Dinner soon," Kamon declared cheerfully.

"What are you doing?" Naota asked dryly.

Kamon ignored Naota's question and continued his suspiciously sordid massage. He was now using his own chin to press down on Haruko's back and rub her.

"Oh, your beard!" Haruko exclaimed with delight in her voice. "That feels good—like an electric massage."

Naota felt as though a cold hand had ripped out his heart and sensed that he'd been betrayed. *"But I saw you first . . ."*

The night Haruko had first come to the Nandaba house, she'd uttered that very phrase to Naota. She'd insisted she'd come to the house because Naota was there. That moment had been special to Naota, if only a little.

"You stink of sweat. At least change out of your uniform!" Naota suddenly complained in a vicious tone.

"Takkun isn't sweaty at all. Oh yeah, that's right—you just stood there."

"Why are you playing for the other team, anyway?"

"Part-time job," Haruko replied. "I thought I should pay a little something toward the electric bill."

The Nandaba house's electric meter had been running at least ten times higher than usual. Naota wouldn't find out the reason for this until later, though.

Canti, who was wearing an apron and had made dinner, carried the dishes from the kitchen. The robot was an ideal housemaid who worked for no pay at all, but his repertoire of dishes didn't exceed that of an elementary school home economics class. Tonight, the menu comprised a large plate of fried eggs, sunny side up.

"Oh, Haruko let me . . ." Kamon insisted, taking one of the fried eggs in his chopsticks and offering it to her in a sensual manner. Haruko opened her mouth wide to accept the egg. It was exactly like something a newlywed couple would do.

Needless to say, Naota was incensed. "What are you two doing?" What he really wanted to say was, *When did you two start having that kind of relationship?* but nothing came out.

What Naota was feeling was simple jealousy, although he wasn't going to admit that to himself. That's why he couldn't complain. All he could do was grip the bat tighter in his hand. When he could bear it no longer, he left the room, enraged.

"What about dinner?" Kamon called out. "We have your favorite—genetically modified bean curd!"

To Naota, Kamon's jovial voice sounded like nothing more than antagonistic.

Naota darted out to the front of his house and instinctively hit a guardrail with the bat in his hand, leaving a scratch on the rail and causing a metallic sound to ring out.

You said I was the one you saw first! Naota shouted to himself, lifting the bat high and hitting the guardrail at least three more times. This time, there was a large dent left in the white rail.

"Hey, you're damaging public property!"

Surprised by the man's voice, Naota turned around. Standing under a streetlamp was a man he'd never seen before. The man was dressed in a suit and was tall and muscular like a professional swimmer.

"Look at the poor rail getting hit by a bat," the man said.

That incident with the bat was the first time the man appeared.

Full Swing

CHAPTER 2

Dusk had fallen at Mabase Bridge.

Naota was sitting with Mamimi on the bank.

"So, you had a fight with Haru?" Mamimi asked.

"As if I'd argue with her."

"Ha! So grown up!"

Naota remembered that Mamimi had looked up to Haruko in the recent past. She often said how cool she thought Mamimi was or how sexy she looked. Naota, who'd been fuming about the dodgy relationship between Kamon and Haruko since yesterday, had reluctantly revealed all the things he was unhappy about to Mamimi. He couldn't talk to his classmates about it, so he didn't have anyone else he could talk to.

It was at times like these that Naota wished his brother were around, but if Tasuku were around, Naota wouldn't be spending time alone with Mamimi. He had mixed feelings about it all.

"Why is your head bandaged?"

"It doesn't matter. That has no bearing on anything."

The truth was that the injury to Naota's head was Haruko's fault, too, but he didn't really feel like explaining that. Perhaps he didn't want to tell Mamimi that he'd struck out three times and was hit by a pitch.

Mamimi, who'd been sitting back to back against Naota, turned around and stared into his eyes, as if searching for something. "You're in a bad mood, Takkun. Why?" Her eyes smiled, revealing that they'd seen his thoughts.

Mamimi's eyes got on Naota's nerves, too. Somehow, it seemed as though her eyes were saying, "Takkun likes Haru." After all, one only gets in a bad mood after fighting with someone one likes.

You must be kidding me, Naota thought. *Who could ever like that untrustworthy witch?*

All of a sudden, Naota remembered the face of the man from the night before, who'd also assumed that Naota liked Haruko. When Naota had snapped and started hitting the guardrail with the bat, that strange man had suddenly spoken to him.

Who was that man anyway? Naota wondered.

After the guardrail incident, the man had come into the shop, and with a tray in hand, started choosing bread. Naota didn't think he'd seen the man before, but nevertheless, he was grateful for a customer, who placed the unsold bread onto his tray one by one.

The well-built man appeared to be in his late-twenties, and he had two strangely thick eyebrows. They were *really* unnatural eyebrows. If inspected closely, they appeared as though they'd been drawn on and were shifting from their original location.

"Very spicy curry rolls," stated the man as he read the label on the counter and furrowed his bizarre eyebrows. "You didn't stock these before, did you?"

At that moment, Haruko's gleeful voice emanated from the back of the store. It sounded like the selfish laughter of someone who could enjoy life without worries or stress.

The man peered toward the back of the store with a sideways glance. "Seems you guys have more and more pointless things. They don't sit well with me."

Naota knew that "pointless things" both referred to the curry rolls and to Haruko, who was responsible for the curry rolls' existence in the shop. The rolls had been added at Haruko's request when she'd first come to the Nandaba house.

Naota was on his guard, perplexed by how this man knew so much about Naota's family.

"How about you? Haven't you noticed that if you force yourself to eat it, you become addicted to it in the end?"

"I hate spicy food," Naota replied. The only thing Naota could manage was Star Prince Curry.

"She really seems interested in you. Are you aware of that?"

Naota wondered if the man was someone from the police. Off the top of his head, Naota could count about ten or twenty crimes that Haruko had committed. It wouldn't surprise him if the authorities were now watching her. The thing that was most surprising was that she hadn't been caught until now.

When Naota failed to say anything, the man smiled. "Keeping your mouth shut. Clever. It's best you don't let too many people know about her. You'll know soon—she is no ordinary woman."

Naota still couldn't force out a reply.

"You should give up older women anyway. They cause nothing but pain." After uttering his final words, the man paid for the bread and left.

"Give up older women"? Naota repeated to himself. The man must have assumed Naota was currently involved with an older woman. *You must be kidding me.*

Who could ever like that untrustworthy witch? Naota felt angry when he thought back to what had happened the night before, but Mamimi paid it no mind as she embraced him from behind.

"I'm going to leave my mark on you!"

Naota hadn't forgotten that on the night of the fire, he'd decided to stay by Mamimi's side forever. Today, they were together, their bodies attached; however, ironically, though touching each other, Naota could sense Mamimi had no particular attachment to him. He was a substitute—and a tragic one at that.

It probably wouldn't bother Mamimi if Naota liked someone else.

Like always, Mamimi pushed Naota down into the grass and started nibbling on his earlobes.

White steam from the MM factory slowly drifted across the red sky above them.

Because it was autumn, the sun set rapidly and the streets were already getting dark.

After he finished playing with Mamimi, Naota headed home, feeling slightly guilty. *I really am a bad person,* he thought.

One day back in kindergarten, Naota's teacher had decided the class was going to play a stupid game where each of the kindergartners confessed the name of someone he or she liked from the opposite sex. Even in kindergarten, children liked one another.

Naota, who'd already matured by the age of five, resented this infringement on his human rights. That sort of rage had been limited to Naota, though. All the girls had kept their mouths shut while the boys sat on the edges of their seats and said aloud the name of the girls they liked, blushing. It probably would've been better to remain quiet or swear there wasn't anyone they liked, but the boys were too simple. If one of them hadn't said a name, there was a danger he wouldn't have been considered manly.

It'd finally been Naota's turn, and there was a girl Naota fancied in the same class. When Naota was asked, however, he didn't say the name of the girl he actually liked. Instead, he named the girl who occasionally sat next to him. He hadn't once noticed the girl next to him, and he definitely hadn't interacted with her enough to like her. Why had he named her? Anyone would've done it. The girl had

occasionally sat by him, so hers was the first name that had come to mind.

Naota could've been scared of people knowing the name of the girl he really liked. Even when he was very young, he was the kind of boy who didn't like people knowing his true feelings. He basically used the girl who sat next to him; it was quite a cowardly thing to do.

One day, not long after the game, the girl who sat next to Naota asked him to play, and Naota ditched weeding the kindergarten yard. They hid together in the closet, eating candy the girl had snuck in her pocket. With sweets stuffed in their mouths, they didn't say anything, simply gazing at each other, smiling. For some reason, it'd felt extremely comfortable.

After that day, the person Naota was keen on became the girl who sat next to him. He couldn't remember the girl's name any longer, but he remembered it happening.

Kindergarten was such an easy time. Even as a boy, Naota had tended to go with the flow of love. So, what was this guilt Naota was feeling now?

When Naota returned home, Haruko was in front of the shop swinging her bat. There was another game between the Martians and the Fragments the next day. It appeared as though she were preparing for that. Her swings cut sharply through the wind. As Naota studied the way Haruko swung the bat, he had to admit that she was good. She was the only person who he admired almost as much as his brother.

"Been practicing your swing all day?" Haruko asked, noticing that Naota had been carrying around Tasuku's bat again.

Considering he hadn't hit the ball once in the last game, Naota felt Haruko was being sarcastic, so he ignored her and tried to enter the house. *This is a girl who might get with my dad. I'm not bothering with her anymore.*

"Why are you ignoring me?"

"Don't talk to me anymore. You've been getting close to my dad, right?"

Haruko pointed to Naota's neck. "You've been playing around, too."

Naota quickly tried to cover his neck, where there was a fresh love bite. *Although this girl told me she came to this house because of me, she isn't bothered by Mamimi and me. Anyway, doesn't what she just said mean she admits to messing around with my dad?*

"I'll coach you. I'm good."

"Don't need it."

"You could hit a home run and be better than your brother."

Haruko's swing was still burned into the back of Naota's mind. He'd always wanted to be as good at batting as his brother, so he decided to let her coach him right then and there.

Naota took a few swings with the bat in front of Haruko, who dropped her normally blithe expression and watched with a highly unusual earnestness.

"Drop your hips a bit more and relax your stance," Haruko instructed.

Naota did what he was told and tried to pay attention to keeping his lower half steady. The sincere tone in Haruko's voice had helped alleviate any initial skepticism he had. Just as he had in kindergarten, Naota was going with the flow.

Surprisingly, this girl's kind of a good person, Naota thought.

"See, better already!" Haruko cheered, holding Naota's bat from behind and casually putting her hands on top of his.

Naota was very sensitive to the feeling of Haruko's hands touching him. Although he did much more sensual things with Mamimi on a regular basis, this felt even more thrilling than those things had.

Perhaps . . . Naota thought, *I don't hate Haruko?*

"Try swinging," Haruko suggested. "Hit it into the sky. A true slugger imagines creating an arch right before he hits the ball."

Maybe I'm over-thinking what's going on between Haruko and my dad, Naota speculated. Haruko was always playing around like that with people. To get jealous over such a thing was childish.

Suddenly, what Haruko had said to Naota the day before came rushing back into his mind. "What did you mean by, 'If you swing, people will know you're not special'?" Naota asked. "Were you suggesting that I think I'm special?"

Haruko laughed. "You do think you're special, don't you?"

Naota didn't know how to respond.

"Whatever happens, if you don't swing the bat, you'll be special, but you'll also be running away." Pointing to one of the stars shining in the night sky, Haruko asked, "See that star? Swing for that. It feels better if you swing the bat for all you're worth."

Strangely, the star that Haruko had chosen appeared to be flickering. It really *was* flickering!

"Um . . . doesn't that star appear to be moving?"

"You think so?" Haruko smiled happily as she gazed up at the flickering star.

The flickering star was actually a static satellite more than twenty-two thousand miles up in the sky. The reason it was moving was because it'd taken a direct hit and its orbital control systems had been destroyed.

Ever since the stationary satellite had first been launched into orbit, its speed and trajectory had been fine-tuned by its internal control system. The satellite had been programmed to change course

or make alterations to its position, if necessary; however, the machine was no longer taking orders from the ground and was out of control. It was because of Haruko Haruhara.

In an underground room beneath Mabase City Police Station, twenty-four-hour surveillance was being conducted on the man-made satellite. Monitors and computer screens were lined up on the wall, and numerous operators were adroitly dealing with the displayed data. The people present had been working in the monitor room with no rest for several weeks, but they weren't police employees; they'd merely borrowed the police facilities as a war room.

"Commander Amarao, we've now completely lost control," reported one of the female operators to her superior, who was sitting at the back of the room.

The operator's superior scowled upon receiving the information. He was the eyebrow man who'd bought bread from Naota's house the previous night. Commander Amarao was a member of a public safety organization that served as a special advisory council to the cabinet. The organization was known as the Department of Interstellar Immigration Bureau by the people involved.

"TTR, target tracking radar, image feed live," stated the report as an enlarged satellite feed was displayed on the monitor.

The satellite had a baseball stuck in it, which, of course, was the home run ball Haruko had hit far into the blue sky during yesterday's game. None of the players had noticed, but the ball Haruko hit had broken through the atmosphere and traveled into space, hitting the satellite above Mabase. It certainly wasn't something that happened every day!

"Part of the position-control jets, remote access, and communication antenna took damage. The operations unit took a direct hit."

"Atmospheric entry: double-zero sixty. Descent beginning."

"Predicted point of impact?" Commander Amarao asked, frowning.

It was late that night, and the residents of Mabase, unaware of the menace threatening their lives high above their heads, slept peacefully as they always did.

In the Nandaba house, Naota, who'd been sleeping in his room, was awoken by the sound of a cat's cries. When he glanced at the balcony, he saw Miyu Miyu. He listened blankly to the mewing for a few moments, but then his cat suddenly stopped and ran off somewhere on a whim.

Naota tried to go back to sleep, but his head itched because of the bandage. During the game, he'd been hit by Haruko's ball and had wrapped a bandage around his head. The impact had only left a bump, though, and it didn't hurt.

Naota got up to remove the itchy bandage. The ball that had hit his head was probably thrown at it intentionally and could've been quite dangerous, but at least there wasn't a horn coming out of his head this time. Remembering back to when he and Haruko had finished batting practice earlier, Naota recalled that Haruko had hugged his head and said, "Yours is the only head that works." That must've meant that his was the only head robots would come out of.

Naota guessed that it was because of those incidents that Haruko had come to live at his house, but no matter what, Naota was happy and believed that Haruko's primary reason for being there was definitely him.

Maybe I don't really dislike her, Naota thought.

Glancing up, Naota noticed that Haruko wasn't on the top bunk. They both had gone to bed and said goodnight, but her bed

was empty. According to the clock, it was almost midnight. *Where did she go?*

Naota feared the worst when he spotted a light shining from his father's room. The bakery opened early. What could his father still be doing up at this hour, unless . . . Terrible scenes floated through Naota's mind.

HARUKO IS IN MY FATHER'S ROOM?

But wait, Naota told himself, *Haruko isn't sleeping in her bed, and my father's light is on in his room. That doesn't mean anything. Dad could've forgotten to turn off the light and Haruko could be in the bathroom.*

HARUKO IS IN MY FATHER'S ROOM?

Naota heard something that sounded very much like Haruko's voice.

"Oh, you're so bad!"

There wasn't any doubt about it—it was coming from Naota's father's room.

Naota couldn't help but listen, standing stock-still.

"Haruko . . . Haruko . . ." Kamon repeated in a gasping moan.

Suddenly, Naota's ears started ringing. "Owww!" he howled as he grabbed his head to try to alleviate the violent, surging pain.

Bursting through the bandage, another horn emerged from his head.

"Marker beacon confirmed," the female operator in Amarao's monitor room called out concurrently with the events transpiring in the Nandaba house.

An extreme wavelength was being displayed on one of the screens. Using a simulator, the girl immediately displayed the area

where the satellite was predicted to impact. "I have it. Right hand monitor."

Amarao stared at the screen and muttered, "I knew it—Mabase."

"Classification: half-active pulse wave. Something is guiding the satellite's descent directly into Mabase."

After hearing the report, Commander Amarao narrowed his startling thick eyebrows.

Full Swing

CHAPTER 3

After that horrific night, things continued to worsen.

The next morning, Naota couldn't stand seeing Kamon's and Haruko's faces, so he left the house straightaway.

It was the day of the second game between the Martians and the Fragments, but Naota didn't have any desire to go, so he slowly walked toward the bank near Mabase Bridge, where he bumped into Mamimi. She was the same as always—a high school girl without anything to do.

They started "playing" in the morning.

White steam poured from the MM factory on the hill and slowly spread across the sky, robbing the world of its color.

Day after day, I'm always in the same place, always looking at the same scene, and repeating the same things over and over again, Naota reflected. *Will I be able to go somewhere else someday?*

Mamimi drew on Naota's back with her finger. It was the beginning of an innocent game where he had to guess what she'd written. The first thing she drew was a character for "ta," probably for the first character of Tasuku's name.

Someday, somewhere, just like my brother . . . Naota started to say to himself.

All of a sudden, the sound of an approaching motorbike engine interrupted their game.

"Oh, it's Haru!" Mamimi exclaimed happily.

Naota had left the house so he wouldn't have to see Haruko, but she'd seen the two of them and stopped nearby. She was wearing her uniform and appeared to be on her way to the baseball field.

"The game's started already! Are you doing unwholesome things again?" Haruko asked.

At that very moment, Mamimi was hugging Naota from behind. Indeed, for a young boy to be doing what Naota had been doing was pretty unwholesome, but Naota didn't want to hear that from the likes of Haruko.

Naota's head bandage was tied tighter than it had been the day before, to keep the horn pushed in.

What exactly were you up to last night? Naota felt like swearing at Haruko. He didn't want Mamimi to hear him sound that jealous, though, so he swallowed his words.

Not knowing what Naota was thinking, Haruko said, "Hey, c'mon, let's go take a swing."

"Takkun's in the game?" Mamimi asked, surprised. "But Takkun isn't the kind of person who would actually swing the bat."

Mamimi's casual remark troubled Naota even more. *Not "the kind of person who would actually swing the bat"?*

Did Mamimi think of Naota the same way Haruko did?

"You can ride with me to the field," Haruko offered.

With his lips still pursed, Naota declined the offer. "No thanks, I don't play baseball."

"It's Canti's first game."

Hearing that, Mamimi's eyes lit up, and she jumped excitedly. "Lord Canti?"

"It's worth it just to see him field," Haruko promised.

"I want to go see!" Mamimi pleaded.

"You know, your home runs yesterday weren't anything special." Naota's words, which were nothing more than those of a sore loser, were already lost on the girls.

"I'm coming, Haru!" Mamimi exclaimed.

"Okay!"

With the elated Mamimi clinging to Haruko's back, the Vespa sped off.

Left alone, Naota shouted, "I'll never let you be my coach again!" bitterly to no one, and then he went home, clenching the bat in his hand.

Until that point, he never would've been able to imagine he could kill his own father.

The house Naota returned to was eerily quiet. Shigekuni and Haruko were at the game, and Kamon wasn't in the shop.

As Naota thought how the bakery might as well shut down, he heard a noise from the back of the house. It was their pet cat, Miyu Miyu, in the corridor.

Miyu Miyu glared into the living room with a strange shimmer in her eyes. Lore said cats could see mysterious things humans couldn't, and it seemed as though their cat had spied something unusual, given that it looked like it was glaring at a monster in the living room.

Naota shared the cat's suspicion and definitely sensed there was someone in his living room. Instinctively squeezing the bat tighter, he peered into the room and saw Kamon sitting alone. At least, Naota thought it was his father. The person looked a little different than his father usually looked. The man wasn't wearing a shirt and was disheveled, leaning against the wall with his mouth open. There was a sense of indecency about him.

Naota thought back to the night before, when he'd felt sickened that Haruko had been in Kamon's room.

"Oh." Noticing Naota, Kamon quickly tried to hide his exposed stomach. He then peered into Naota's face and shot a satisfied smile as if he were gloating about something. "Oh, Haruko, I asked you not to leave any marks. If Naota sees them, there's going to be trouble."

Naota glanced at Kamon's abdomen. It was obvious that what he was trying to hide were love bites. Naota could feel his face stiffening up and his disquiet quickly turned to rage.

To provoke his son further, Kamon said, "You see, your father and Haruko have *that* kind of relationship."

"That kind of relationship"? Naota felt an unspeakable bitterness toward such a blatant display of self-satisfaction and felt completely betrayed. His mind replayed the words Haruko had said to him about seeing him first. *Damn it! Despite the fact that she said that . . .*

Kamon leaned against the wall, trying to stand up straight. "You must be hungry. We have your favorite—genetically modified bean curd—Naotaaa."

Having addressed Naota with an odd intonation, Kamon made Naota feel as though he were being made a fool of even more. Then, Kamon inexplicably repeated Naota's name over and over again like a broken record. "Naotaaa, Naotaaa, Naotaaa . . ."

Naota screamed at his father to shut up, gripping the metal bat in his hand.

That was when the switch flipped on.

Naota suddenly whacked the television in front of him with the bat, causing the cracking of Braun tube and the shattering of plastic.

Although Naota had only hit the television, his father made a sickening "ugh" sound, like one a chicken makes when its neck is broken.

When Naota glanced over, he saw that Kamon's neck was bent at an unusual angle and that Kamon had collapsed on the floor in front of him. Actually, the brass clock that'd been on top of the television had flown up with the force of the whack and landed directly atop Kamon's head.

Naota sucked in his breath and took a step back.

An hour after the crime, Naota was in the interrogation room at the Mabase Police Station. As he waited alone in the sparse room, he stared through the barred glass window and could see the midday sun shining brightly outside.

"Shock! Sixth Grade Elementary Schooler Snaps, Beats Father with Bat!" That would be the next day's newspaper headlines.

"No, no—he was such an ordinary, mature, good kid. You never would've thought it of Naota. . . ." That's what Naota's homeroom teacher Miyaji and other people would say on chat shows.

I killed my father, and now I'm in an interrogation room facing homicide charges. It's still light out. Hey, what time did I get up today?

Naota was finding it difficult to breathe, not due to lack of air in the room, but because he was thinking of the wide-eyed, fallen Kamon, and was having flashbacks of his father's fallen corpse.

No, my dad isn't dead. As if my dad could be dead! It was a bad dream—all a bad dream. Homicide? Ludicrous. "Homicide" is a word I've only heard on TV dramas. Murderer? It's a word I've heard on the news. As if my dad could be dead.

MY DAD IS COLLAPSED ON THE FLOOR AND HIS HEART WASN'T BEATING.

What happened to me? Why did I turn out like this? What would my brother and grandfather think?

Another flashback: the corpse with both eyes wide open . . .

I killed someone. I'M A MURDERER. Maybe they'll publish the essay I wrote at school in the weeklies.

"Future Dreams: When I grow up, I think I'd like to leave this town, because I smell something rotten about the phrase 'age of local autonomy' . . ."

Damn, if only I'd written something better than that. All the specialists who analyze my psychological state are going to interpret it as "Boy A's internalized psychopathic tendencies."

What time is it? Why doesn't this room have a clock? How did I get here? Why didn't I go to school today? Oh yes, it's a holiday. I would've been better off going to the baseball game rather than this. I should've been standing in the batter's box, even if all I'd done was stand. Why am I not holding the bat anymore? That's my brother's special bat. Help me, Tasuku. I can't breathe. I feel heavy—so heavy. The chair I'm sitting on feels like an elevator descending down.

SOMEBODY . . . HELP ME!

The sound of footsteps approached in the corridor outside the interrogation room.

"I'm going to be the one dealing with this," a man's voice declared. It was a voice Kaota remembered from somewhere.

When the door opened, the eyebrow man, Commander Amarao, was standing there.

Just as I thought—he's a policeman! Naota said to himself.

Amarao shut the door and sat down in the chair opposite Naota, removing an electronic organizer from his wide chest pocket and reading its display. "Naota Nandaba, sixth grade student, Mabase Elementary School. Father: Kamon Nandaba, baker, forty-seven years old. Until ten years ago, worked at a publishing house in Tokyo as an assistant editor-in-chief for a subculture magazine. About a month ago, a female, whose full identity is unknown but who is going by the name Haruko Haruhara, took up residence in the Nandaba house."

The eyebrow man had really done his research. He'd probably been watching Naota's house for quite a while in order to capture Haruko, but it surely had taken him by surprise when Naota committed murder.

"You shouldn't have used a bat," Amarao said. "Your house is a bakery. You could've at least used some unsold French bread."

"I didn't hit him," Naota replied quietly.

It was the truth. Naota hadn't hit his father; however, he didn't think Amarao would believe him.

"It must've hurt," Amarao assessed, pouring two cups of coffee from the pot that was sitting on a server next to him and offering one cup to Naota. The man put sugar cubes into Naota's cup one by one. "Here, you like sweet stuff, right?"

Naota thought super-sweet coffee must be an interrogation method, but surprisingly, the man put the same amount, if not more, into his own cup, stirring it with a spoon. He really must've enjoyed sweet stuff, because he put the cup to his mouth without hesitation.

Naota had decided to tell the truth, regardless of whether anyone believed him. "I only hit the television."

"Hit?"

"It was an accident."

With a serious look in his eyes, Amarao said, "I thought you were the kind of guy who couldn't swing at anything except for guardrails."

"Couldn't swing at anything"? Naota became increasingly confused. *What does "you were the kind of guy who couldn't swing at anything except for guardrails" mean?*

Amarao calmly drank his coffee, which was more like sugary soup. "An older woman was a mistake after all, eh? She wasn't worth fighting with your father over?"

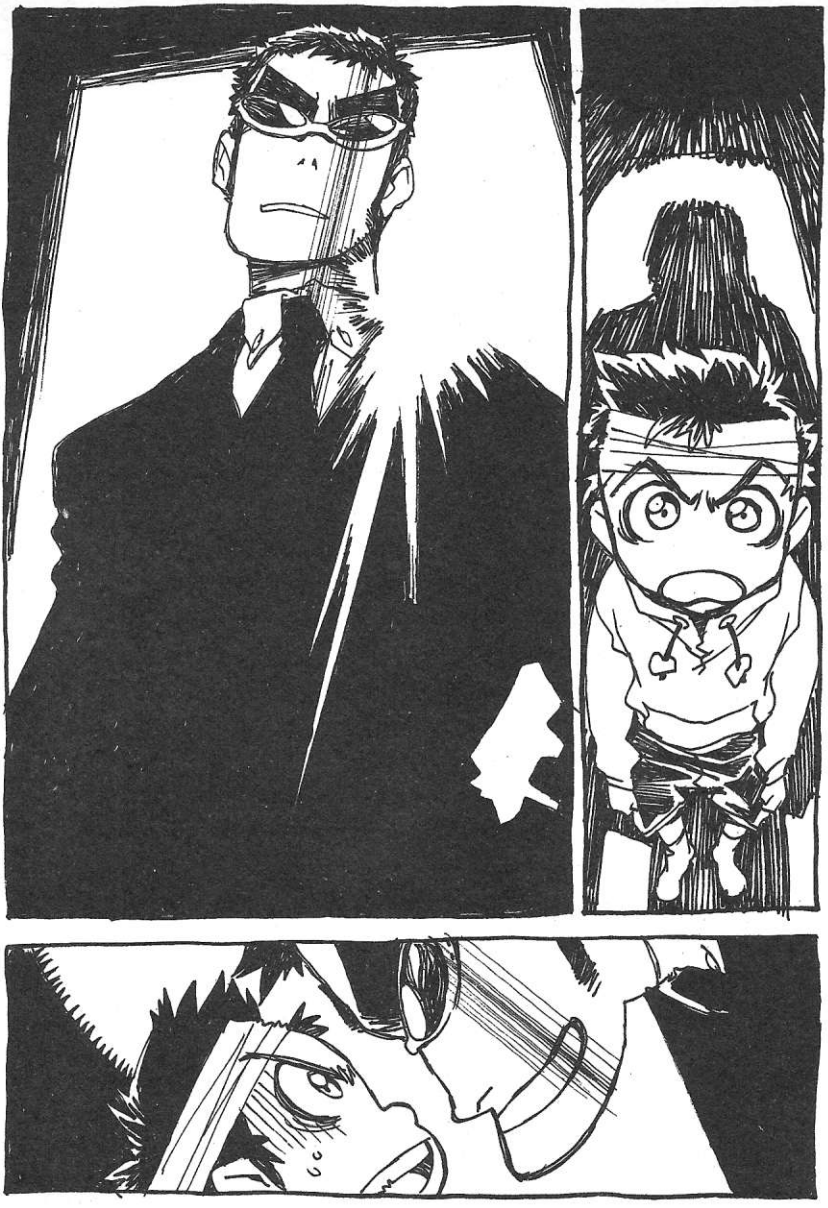
"Haruko doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Haruko? You call her by her first name. You must be close."

"I don't know."

"She's your batting coach, isn't she? Well, she is quite attractive."

"I *said* Haruko doesn't have anything to do with this!" Naota repeated, raising his voice because Amarao had gotten to the heart of the matter.



"Well, why did you hit him?" Amarao asked somewhat harshly.

"I didn't hit him!" Naota replied. "I hit the television."

"So, you hit the television."

"Yes, because—"

"Because you were jealous?"

Naota fell silent and nodded.

"Don't worry. You won't be charged."

He must be talking about juvenile law, Naota thought.

Naota wasn't yet twenty years old, but the reality was that he'd committed a crime. He had no idea what was going to happen to him legally.

"You're a victim, too," Amarao added. "You were merely caught up in something."

"Victim," Naota whispered. *Victim? Why am I a victim?*

It seemed as though this man had made a gross error. Even if he'd indirectly caused his father's death, Naota felt as though he had to take responsibility for it.

"Do you really think you killed him yourself?"

Naota didn't know how to respond.

"More important, look at this, Naota."

"More important?" Naota asked, wondering what could be more important than a violent incident in which an elementary school student had killed his father.

After Amarao tapped on his electronic organizer, something appeared on a nearby TV monitor. It was sky, but there was also something shining in the very center of the screen that appeared to be a man-made satellite. When Amarao enlarged the picture, Naota could see that the satellite was shaking violently.

"This is a real picture. Right now, in the sky above the city, a satellite is falling. This isn't an ordinary satellite, either. It's a satellite bomb with massive destructive capacity."

What is this man saying? Naota wondered as he took a sip of the coffee. It was far sweeter than he'd expected, and the dramatic taste increased the glucose levels in Naota's befuddled brain. *What is this man saying about a satellite bomb?*

"If the satellite bomb explodes, it will destroy Mabase. Do you understand what I'm saying? If that happens, no one will be saved. You get it? No. One. Will. Be. Saved. Not a single kitten. Of course, you have to keep what I'm saying to you now a secret—even from your father."

"Eh?" Naota muttered. "My dad, he's . . . still alive?"

"Everyone will die, regardless of whether we evacuate now. No one will be saved."

Naota flashed back to his father's corpse once again.

"So, go home quickly and tell her we need her to hit another home run. Tell her the message is from a hometown fan."

Amarao was referring to Haruko. Somehow, this man was familiar with her.

"Why Haruko?"

"She's from the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood."

Naota didn't bother probing into what a Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood was. It didn't sound like something he would understand, even if it were explained to him. Naota noticed Amarao's unusually fat eyebrows again. They simply were *not* natural eyebrows.

"You're a victim, too," Amarao had said previously. A victim. It seemed as though he'd actually meant a victim of Haruko, which meant there were other victims like Naota out there. Every time Amarao had mentioned Haruko, he'd seemed oddly emotional. Maybe he'd been a victim of Haruko, too.

Naota got confused trying to process all the information.

Full Swing

CHAPTER 4

When Naota got home, he wandered into the backyard, which was connected to the living room, the scene of the crime.

As he intrepidly stepped up into the living room from the yard, he was startled to see his father's feet beyond the door, and he froze. Just past the door was his father's corpse—the corpse Naota had created with his own hands.

On the ground nearby lay the violent weapon Naota had used. It didn't appear as though anyone had been at the scene since he'd run out, and there wasn't any evidence suggesting there had been a police crime-scene investigation.

Naota was confused again. He'd gone to the police and had confessed to everything, yet they'd released him, and he was back home. What was all this? In spite of his cool mint head, Naota found it difficult to figure out what was going on.

"*You can check with your own eyes. You didn't hurt anyone,*" Naota repeated the words Amarao had said to him earlier, as Naota was leaving the police station. *I didn't hurt anyone? Then, what's this dead body?*

Naota heard Miyu Miyu's cry at his feet. The cat's relaxed meowing seemed inappropriate for the moment. Having mustered up his courage, Naota entered the living room, where his father's body lay on the floor, with his head still at a grotesque angle and his eyes wide open, staring ghoulishly at the ceiling. Naota didn't have to check for a pulse; this body wasn't breathing. It definitely wasn't the body of a living thing.

Exactly as Amarao had said, however, it seemed that Naota hadn't committed murder. A green, sparkling liquid that resembled some type of oil oozed from the corpse's head, which meant that the corpse wasn't human; it was an android. No one could've predicted that Haruko would've brought such an extraordinary thing into the house.

"That damn housekeeper," Naota sneered.

Upon hearing a vague noise coming from the closet, Naota forcibly pulled open the door and was surprised to find a mummy. Actually, it was a man dehydrated like a mummy. That must've been Kamon, his real father.

The father-like mummy turned to Naota and laughed weakly.

He's still alive. HE'S STILL ALIVE!

"Ahhhhhh!" Naota hugged his father's shriveled body joyfully, kicking the android onto the balcony and running into the bathroom.

Naota was thinking about dehydrated food, like dried Shitake mushrooms, which could be revived if water were added to them. Relying on the same theory, he sunk Kamon into the bathtub, turned the tap on full blast, and poured water onto his father's body. It was possible that a ridiculous solution would work in a ridiculous situation. It was ludicrous, but Naota's simple, direct method was right on, and Kamon quickly revived.

"The returned," Kamon whispered. "I'm thirsty."

Naota took a breath before realizing the reason for his relief and the reason his brain was no longer stressed wasn't because he wasn't a killer. It wasn't the relief of having escaped a crime, either. It was because he was happy. His father was alive and he was happy. The distress he'd felt before was because he couldn't come to terms with the sudden loss of his father.

"Your father wasn't useful for Haruko," Kamon said serenely. "She asked if she could borrow my head and, delighted, I agreed. But it seems as though I died for a while."

Naota was speechless.

"Haruko really is out of the ordinary," Kamon commented, wearing an unusual expression of good cheer as he glanced up at Naota from the bathtub. "Well, Naota, it seems as though you love your real father."

Naota felt a bit spiteful after hearing his father's last remark, but his displeasure couldn't suppress the happiness he felt when he saw Kamon's sunny face staring at him.

Dad's here. He's alive, right in front of you, Naota told himself.

Suddenly, the sound of a motorbike roared from the backyard. It was a noise Naota was extremely familiar with.

It's her! Still irate, Naota ran from the bathroom to give Haruko a piece of his mind, but as he hurried to get to her, he tripped over the android Kamon that was still on the balcony and fell into the garden. "Ouch!"

Haruko was on her Vespa in the garden, still wearing her baseball uniform. "You should be careful, running around like that."

Gazing at Haruko's happy-go-lucky face, Naota asked, "What's with this robot father?"

All of a sudden, the upper torso of the android sat up and spoke: "If Naota sees, there's going to be trouble."

Haruko violently kicked the imitation Kamon, causing the android to short out and collapse again. A lid on its bare chest opened, revealing the internal electronics.

"Oh, Haruko, I asked you not to leave any marks," the android said.

The chest marks the android had tried to hide hadn't been love bites—they were a panel.

Naota inadvertently smirked, but in truth, he felt like laughing and crying at the same time. When he thought about it calmly, however, he knew it wasn't the appropriate time for either. Surely this housekeeper who'd changed Naota's father into an android was more dangerous than a housekeeper who merely fooled around?

"Who are you *really?*" Naota asked.

"I'm a manifestation of your boyhood desires."

"Stop messing around."

"Takkun."

"What?"

"I saw Takkun first, right?" Haruko smiled.

Enraptured by Haruko's smile, Naota's heart skipped for a second—and only for a second. *Idiot, what are you thinking?* he scolded himself.

Naota quickly changed the topic for fear that Haruko could read his thoughts. "Do you know about the satellite falling?"

Amarao had said an artificial satellite was going to fall on Mabase. Even scarier was that the satellite was a bomb, and the only person who could avert such a disaster was Haruko Haruhara. Considering there was a massive bomb about to explode right on his head, why wasn't Amarao more panicked?

"Doubleheaders take a lot out of you," Haruko remarked. "Better tell the hometown fan it'll cost him."

The mock satellite steadily hurtled toward Mabase.

It wasn't a typical man-made satellite, and it didn't have a normal descent. As it plummeted, it began to break up, taking the shape of a metal globe. The fact that it resembled a round, implosion-type nuclear weapon was the reason the satellite was so dangerous.

The satellite was the ultimate airborne bomb, adjusting its friction with the atmosphere using simple gravity controls as it descended toward its target area. Most of it had been constructed in Japan, and the satellite's fuse and gravity control modules bore the logo of MM.

There was very little time left before it would collide into Mabase.

The bomb was set to detonate when it came in contact with the Earth's surface and had stopped for one fiftieth of a second.

Meanwhile, in an underground surveillance room, Amarao and his team were monitoring the satellite bomb's descent.

"I think we should file a complaint to the Brotherhood," one of the female operators called out.

"No," Amarao replied. "This satellite bomb was set up so we could use it in case of an emergency. Raharu is simply using that."

"Raharu?"

"Galaxy Space Police Agent Raharu Haruha, a terrifying woman. She's using the satellite bomb as a pickoff throw against Medical Mechanica and the Japanese government diplomats."

Everyone remained silent, but they were naturally growing increasingly frantic on the inside. The truth was that they didn't have the spirit to sacrifice their own lives for their mission, and they knew the underground room they were in provided no shelter.

One of the other monitors displayed a careening Vespa ridden by two people. The scooter was being driven by Raharu—Haruko—and behind her, Naota was clinging on.

The operators' hearts were frozen, knowing their lives depended on that strange pair.

As a result of the satellite's gravity controls, the sky above Mabase had started to become stormy.

On top of one of the houses, a carefree high school girl gazed up at the storm clouds gathering overhead. It was Mamimi, and

next to her was Canti. Together, they studied the swirling black formations.

By some unknown means, Canti was able to display the satellite's descent on its face monitor, which impressed Mamimi.

"Oh, Lord of Fear, you're very late!" Mamimi exclaimed with regard to the satellite. "I wonder if we'll get tomorrow off school."

Without replying, Canti switched the display to show Haruko and Naota, who'd finally reached the baseball field.

Mamimi wore a curious expression. "Takkun . . . what are you going to do?"

What am I going to do? Naota worried as he arrived at the baseball field. He'd thought that because Haruko was involved, he'd have to use Canti to deal with the satellite bomb; however, there wasn't a single person or robot on the field.

Staring up, Naota could see the thick black clouds billowing violently across the sky. The storm had developed into a terrifying sight. It was like a black sea of tar raging in the heavens.

Naota sensed in his skin that far beyond the thick black clouds, the dangerous weapon was heading straight for the baseball field. "It's coming?"

The satellite bomb wasn't visible to the naked eye, but it wasn't actually falling toward Mabase, anyway; it was aimed directly toward the bulge on Naota's head. The satellite and Naota's bulge had been communicating through half-active pulse waves.

It's heading straight for me. My pounding head is drawing that thing right to me! Naota thought when he realized this frightening reality.

"Well then . . ." Haruko began as she put her hand in her pocket.

Just as Naota thought Haruko was going to pull out yet another super weapon, it turned out to be a child's shower cap—simply an everyday shower cap people used in the shower to avoid getting soap in their eyes when washing their hair.

"What's that?"

"No matter. No matter," Haruko replied, tearing off Naota's head bandages. She quickly put the shower cap on Naota before inserting her hand into his head. Yes, right into the inside of his head. Haruko's arm reached deeply into Naota's head as if she were putting her hand into liquid.

"Whoa, wait a sec. What are you doing?" Naota's skin crawled. Having a hand in his head felt a hundred times worse than swallowing an internal camera. He could feel Haruko's hand wriggling inside his body, through his head and down his throat, and he couldn't help but think that she hadn't used antibacterial lotion or sterilized her hands.

As if she were looking for something in a barrel of rice, Haruko didn't hold back when pushing her hands into the depths of Naota's head. "I see—this is what it feels like inside a boy."

"Hey, don't touch that from behind," Naota said randomly.

Haruko was clearly enjoying it. With an indecent smile, she finally located the thing she'd been looking for and pulled it out, gripping some sort of metallic instrument in her hand. It was the next horn that would've come out of Naota's head, the bulge that had been communicating with the satellite. Haruko had intended to pull the horn out of Naota's head, but the annoying object hadn't separated from his head and had gotten caught.

Haruko braced her feet on Naota's head and aggressively tried to pull out the horn. "Hey, c'mon! Hurry up and come out."

"No, don't rush it," Naota pleaded. "If you rush it, it won't come out. Ugh, not so hard!"

The object finally dislodged with a satisfying popping sound. It looked a lot like the bass guitar that Haruko always carried with her.

"What's that?" Naota asked.

Haruko grinned. "Your bat!"

"Entered Earth's atmosphere. Altitude: fifty-six thousand feet."

Tension was at its boiling point in the underground surveillance room. Unlike normal residents, the people in this room knew the danger of the bomb hitting its destination. They also knew their chance of survival with the bomb this close was low. However, Amarao, who'd been tracing the satellite's course, had discovered another faint hope that didn't involve Haruko.

"We might be safe with this," Amarao suggested.

His idea had to do with the angle of entry. Even with gravity controls and speed adjustments, the satellite would skip off the Earth's atmosphere and veer away at an angle. His hopes were immediately shattered, though, when he realized the satellite's angle changed sharply not because of a velocity change, but because of its rotation.

"It's a sinker!" Amarao yelled instinctively.

Their only hope now was Raharu Haruha—Haruko. If she didn't have a secret plan, their lives, and all fifty thousand lives in Mabase, would be lost.

Several of the monitors were showing Naota and Haruko on the baseball field. Haruko had pulled an unknown object from Naota's head that looked exactly like the Brotherhood's guitar-shaped time-space interference weapon.

Amarao knew Haruko was a top-notch expert at that weapon. *I see,* Amarao thought. *You're going to hit the satellite bomb back with this new weapon.*

Jumping out of his chair, Amarao yelled again: "What are you doing? There's no way that kid can do it!" He was referring to the monitor, which had just revealed Haruko handing the weapon over to Naota.

What a fool I am! I shouldn't have trusted Raharu, Amarao thought, beating his fist against the desk. *She always does this. She plays stupid games at critical moments. It was the same back then. . . .*

All the operators in the room became startled as they watched their superior quickly lose color in his face.

Needless to say, all the color had drained from Naota's face, too. Haruko had told him to hit the falling satellite bomb back into space with the thing in his hand. It sounded far too ridiculous.

The unfamiliar weapon intimidated Naota, but Haruko smiled as coolly as always. "It's okay," she said. "Just do it like I showed you."

"Like I showed you . . ." Naota racked his brains, trying to remember what she'd showed him.

"In other words, I think I'm special?"

"But you do think you're special, don't you? Whatever happens, if you don't swing the bat, you'll be special, but you'll only be running away. See that star? Swing for that."

That star. Gazing upward, Naota could see the satellite heading steadily toward them with his own eyes. There wasn't anywhere to run. He had to swing or die. In his heart, Naota understood: If he didn't want to die, the only thing he could do was swing the bat. In this case, if he did swing, he'd be special.

"But you think you're special, don't you?" Haruko had said.

"But," Naota thought, *until now, I'd never thought of myself as that special. I think. Maybe. What is "special," anyway? The reason I*

couldn't swing the bat in the game was because I knew I couldn't hit it back. It was only because of that . . . I GET IT. I'M NOT REALLY ANYTHING SPECIAL!

Naota gripped the guitar-shaped weapon and assumed a relaxed batting stance that Haruko had shown him, keeping his gaze firmly on the incoming satellite. From an outsider's point of view, it was simply suicide. However, Naota knew from experience that if Haruko was involved, common sense meant nothing.

Just giving it a shot is enough, right? Just trying . . . Naota reminded himself.

Perhaps without Naota realizing it, Haruko had greatly influenced his character.

Readying himself, Naota looked up and watched the approaching satellite in slow motion. He could clearly see it in its entirety, as if it were a balloon falling. In other words, it was as though Naota was in a state in which he could see the ball to its seams.

Feels good . . . I can do this! As his body reacted to his enthusiasm, Naota swung, hitting the satellite bomb dead on. With the weapon in his hand, Naota squarely bludgeoned the giant black metal baseball, which was several meters in diameter.

Holding their breath, the operators watched Naota's swing.

"He swung the bat!" Amarao exclaimed, stunned.

"Uraaagh!" the boy on the monitor screamed.

All of a sudden, the shockwave from the impact blew through the surroundings, and the satellite disappeared into the blue sky.

Naota had really hit it back. When it was reported that the satellite was flying toward another planet at warp speed two, there was a huge, long-awaited sigh of relief in the monitor room.


ヨけ!?

Amarao still couldn't believe Naota had swung the bat. "Maybe he really did hit his father."

If it hadn't been an android, could this boy really have killed his father?

Amarao stared at Naota on the monitor as the boy frolicked with Haruko.

Haruko hugged Naota in delight, rubbing his head with her finger. "See, you can do it if you try! See, see?"

"Stop it! That hurts!" Naota exclaimed, although he was happy, too. His palms were numb, but it felt good. It was the same feeling he got when he'd ridden on the speeding Vespa—the time when his brain had been empty.

Maybe this is how Haruko always feels.

Unaware of the harsh fate that awaited him, Naota laughed out loud.

Commentary

Kazuya Tsurumaki (Fooly Cooly Producer)

I thought about what it means to be a grown-up and what it means to be a child.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, I don't believe that all children will become grown-ups. They may get older, get taller, pay taxes, and get married, but there are people who will never become grown up. Take someone who ends up having to climb the ladder to being an adult two steps at a time due to some intense trauma. While this is happening, he may look at trivial things such as manga, sex symbols, railways, and fantasies. Then, there are the rest of us in the year 2000 A.D., whom those people pass on the stairs. More people fit into the latter group.

According to [Japanese] law, you're considered an grown-up as soon as you turn twenty, but this isn't the case. When I turned twenty, I was still in front of the television, critically hitting Metal Slimes in the *Dragon Quest* I'd bought at a used game store, and resetting when I got frustrated. A real grown-up wouldn't have reset. It's a kind of "Time out! Time out!" cheat particular to children. If Nintendo started to make an adult system that could play erotic games, I'd ask them not to include a reset button. Grown-ups, who don't have the luxury of resetting as they walk through life, have a right and duty to experience that struggle in games, as well.

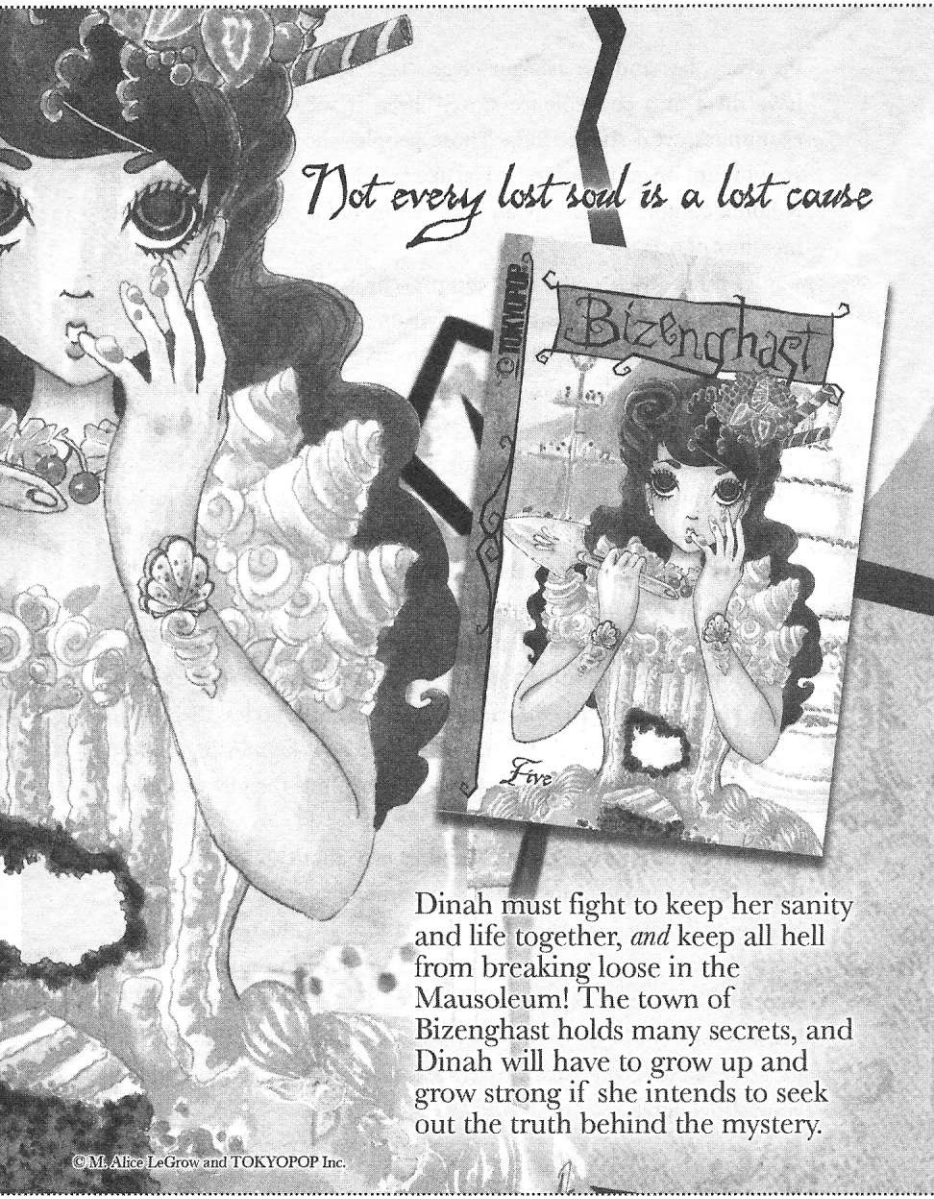
Being a total kid, I buy a BOMB every month. To a proper adult, BOMBs are more childish than multicolored bonbons for kiddies. I can tell simply by comparing how they smell. Just as Kenzo Kitakata said, to be an adult is to smell like squid and breasts. (No, he didn't really say that.) However, once you pass thirty, another problem arises. In my workplace, there are seven desks, and four of them have BOMBs on them. What do you think about this? And it won't do you any good to run away saying, "Oh, but I want to read Lilly's column" or to take out an adult's secret weapon, a balance sheet. That only makes it worse. At a nearby Sunkus, seven or eight BOMBs are stacked

up every day, and we ask ourselves, "Isn't this a first in Japan—to have these at a convenience store?" Even if we were to talk about economics, we'd still be kids. Those people who still can't accept it should shut up and go observe Haruka Suenaga or Masami Nagasawa. A Lolita complex is merely an adult admiring a child—a grown-up metamorphosis.

I think I've become a bit too preachy, so I'll change gears. This sort of improvisation is kind of grown-up.

I like Diet Coke. This is grown-up. The children I want to direct (being the adult I am) will choose Pepsi. It's like what Koikeya is to potato chips, Lee is to jeans, and the Dom is to mobile suits. To choose the main road of Coca-Cola is adult. If you're looking for zero calories, you have Diet Coke for the same price. But how much is really for your diet? Drinking Diet Coke won't make you lose weight. The cool thing about it is the accompanying positive thinking that tells you, "This won't be an obstacle to your diet." Because simply taking the main road is adult and will turn you old-geezer-like before you know it, you try adding the negative value of "diet" to control this. Then, you have the really off-the-wall Fanta. Grape, no less. Be careful with those, or it'll be, "If he's so grown-up, why is he messing around with that stuff?" You might fool your mother, but the girl at Sunkus won't let it slip by her.

Many of you will say, "He didn't talk about *FLCL* at all." I'm sorry. You know, deciding what I should write is tough. As a director, interpreting your scriptwriter's novelization of your original anime is tough even for a proper grown-up. If I'd been too intricate in my wannabe-Kenzaburo Oe interpretation, the book itself would've become vague. The very adult Mr. Enokido said, "Isn't the best way to understand *Fooly Cooly* to read into all the various subtleties yourself?" I agree.



Dinah must fight to keep her sanity and life together, *and* keep all hell from breaking loose in the Mausoleum! The town of Bizenghast holds many secrets, and Dinah will have to grow up and grow strong if she intends to seek out the truth behind the mystery.

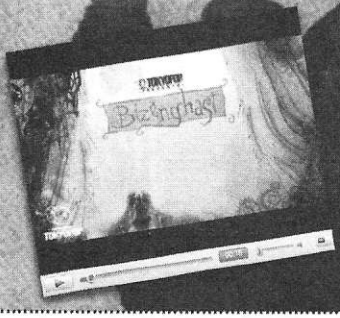
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